



A

Waltz in the Park

DEB
MARLOWE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A HALF MOON HOUSE SERIES NOVELLA

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Chapter One
London, England
1814

“I see that you are still keeping company with that whore.”

Mr. James Vickers stiffened, his fists and shoulders going tight at the sound of the familiar, heavy rasp. He turned slightly. “Good evening, Father.”

Lord Vickers sneered and gestured toward the glass he held. “And still getting soused in public, too, I see.”

Vickers promptly tossed back the rest of his no-longer-chilled champagne. In truth, he hadn’t been foxed in a good long time—but he was fiendishly glad that his father hadn’t noticed. He raised the empty glass in a mock salute once he’d finished. “I’m very well, thank you. And I see that you are still masquerading as a gentleman.”

He had to speak up to be heard over the din in Lady Dalton’s ballroom. He took spiteful pleasure in delivering the barb in a tone louder than strictly necessary.

Beside him, Hestia Wright smiled brightly, causing at least one of the men on the nearby dance floor to stumble. “Good evening to you, Lord Vickers.” Her volume nearly matched his own. “Thank you! Of course we at Half Moon House will be happy to accept your donation.” She winked as she began to sidle away. “I’ll send ‘round a note to your man of business tomorrow to make arrangements.”

With a commiserating glance, she faded into the crowd. Vickers watched her go with resignation. Hestia Wright didn’t get invited to every Society ball, but she greatly improved each one she attended. Lady Dalton had apparently invited *everyone* in London to her crush of a ball. Clearly they all had accepted too. Hundreds, from Society’s elite to the hangers-on at the fringe of the beau monde, had come to see and be seen, to dance and gossip, to fight for a bit of heavily perfumed air and a spot to breathe it. Rumor had it even the

reclusive Duke of Aldmere was in attendance.

His father glared after Hestia. "I should have thought you would have tired of her long ago."

Vickers sighed. "Father, you know Hestia Wright is a philanthropist now. Everyone knows it. She is a dear friend to me. And in any case, she was never a mere whore. She was, simply put, the most beautiful, accomplished and charming courtesan to ever grace England or the Continent." He shook his head. "And I would be careful how you speak of her, were I you. There are statesmen, royal princes, and wealthy and powerful men aplenty who are most displeased to hear her spoken ill of."

The viscount harrumphed. "Once a whore, always a whore."

"Well, if anyone was in a position to know, it would be you, sir. You've kept company with enough of them." Vickers perked up suddenly and allowed the corner of his mouth to quirk in sudden mockery. "In fact, I danced earlier with one of your old amours—the widowed Lady Athbert. Is that what is bothering you?"

At his father's grimace Vickers gleefully drove the stake home. "In point of fact, she's not the only one of your past concubines I've seen recently. Marjorie Potts—she held residence in your cozy Compton Street love nest at one time, did she not?"

Color blazed in his father's face. He made a strangled sound.

"She's dealing cards at the Velvet Nook these days. I do believe you ruined her for other men."

He meant that literally. It must have been about Marjorie Potts' time that the philandering men of the *ton* had figured out they had no wish to take up with his father's leavings.

"She asked me to pass on her greetings, by the by, and tell you that she'd rather die in a gutter than come back to Compton."

His father hissed like a steam valve about to release. His flush grew dangerously deep. James watched, enjoying the sweet, smooth flood of satisfaction starting to run in his veins.

"Ungrateful, unnatural son—"

"Now, now," he interrupted. "Do not cast aspersions upon my mother's good name. The gossips would surely rejoice if I called you

out, but I don't believe you would enjoy the experience."

The viscount fought to control the fury bubbling just beneath his florid surface—even as Vickers gloried in his struggle. This. This was his life's work. Once he'd been a blind fool, believing that duty and family honor comprised his purpose. Now he knew better. He was the silent witness to his father's sins. The constantly pricking thorn in his sire's side—and he'd developed an inventive knack for the work.

"Wicked ingrate!" His father pointed a shaky finger at him. "You disgrace your name with every breath you take. Bad enough you must spend your life rolling about the gutters. I'll thank you to stay far away from anyone associated with me." He whirled on his heel and stalked off.

Frowning, Vickers watched him until he was lost in the crush. What about that little exchange had shaken his father so? They'd had far more acrimonious encounters in the past.

"Good heavens," Hestia said from behind him. "I haven't seen him so angry since our friendship first began."

"Yes, it's been too long since I've touched a real nerve." And as always, his father's anger fueled his own. Hestia, thanks to all the powers that be, had shown him how to tame the beast, pulled him from the brink of destruction and taught him how to focus his fury so that it did not destroy himself or others. But the old rage still lurked in the basement of his soul.

"Not for lack of trying, surely," Hestia said with a grin. "What did you do to rile him up?"

"I'm not sure," Vickers mused. "I think perhaps he's annoyed that I've had contact with a couple of his old mistresses." He flashed Hestia a grin. "You know what that means."

"Do I?"

"It means that now I must speak to them all!" His chuckle lacked humor. "God knows the list is long enough. I should be able to annoy him all Season long."

Hestia gazed thoughtfully after the old man. "Be careful, my dear. Something tells me there's more here than meets the eye."

Vickers grinned. “Good. I’ve been *quietly* humiliating him for too long.”

“And now?” Hestia asked.

“Hmmm.” James still stared thoughtfully after his father.

“Now I find I’m in the mood to create a scandal.”

* * *

“The very image of propriety. That is what you *must* project this season.”

Miss Adelaide Stockton jumped when her Great-Aunt Delia poked her in the side.

“Listen now, my young miss. You’ve looks enough. That picture of innocence you portray is appealing to many men and you’re prettier overall than most of these hen-wits.” She gestured and nearly struck a passing gentleman with her quizzing glass. It was getting to be a tight fit in Lady Dalton’s crowded ballroom tonight—even in the matron’s corner, where they sat on spindly chairs and watched the dancing. “But your dowry is merely adequate—no inspiring amount—and you’ve your mother’s sins to live down.”

Addy bit back a protest. Her mother had been in love and acted accordingly—which didn’t count as a sin in her book.

“Almost worse—you’re saddled with my alley cat of a daughter for a chaperone.” Great-Aunt Delia snorted. “It all adds up in the columns stacked against you.”

Addy sighed.

“I know. It doesn’t look good for you, gel. Your father should never have accepted that position with the East India Company. What was he thinking, taking off for the East, abandoning that baby daughter and leaving before he saw you settled?”

“He wasn’t thinking,” Addy replied. She knew well enough why Papa had gone. He’d been *feeling*—feeling as if he couldn’t bear to stay here and be reminded of Mama at every turn.

“How just like a man, to cater to his own shortcomings and leave you here, stranded with the likes of my Rosamond.” The old

woman shook her head. "In any case, he took pains to tell me that you are not like other girls. Spirited, he says you are." She narrowed her eyes. "I know what that translates to, missy. Trouble."

Addy tried to look innocent.

Her great-aunt shook a finger at her. "It's true enough, a bit of fire in your belly would have been a boon back in my day. My generation knew how to live life with spice and a taste of drama." She sighed. "Those days are gone now. It's all rules and propriety now, girl. These modern gentlemen want a girl prim and proper and laced up tight—so that's what you'll have to give them. There can be none of the shenanigans you got up to at home."

"You wouldn't call them shenanigans had you been there, ma'am." Addy felt compelled to come to her own defense.

"Unfortunately, the young men at home found my dowry to be more than adequate—especially the parcel of land that comes with it. Two of them made a bet—each convinced they could gain my hand—and the land—before the other."

Her aunt looked suddenly interested. "And what did you do about it?"

"When I found myself being maneuvered into a compromising position by Theodore Longlath, I spun him a vivid tale about the red, itchy rash I'd been plagued with—all over."

"Effective," her aunt remarked.

"True. He was too busy scratching to try anything else."

"And the other?"

"He got a bit more inventive. He feigned an accident on our estate, so that he would be brought back to the house to have his injuries tended to."

Her aunt merely raised a brow.

Addy smiled. "He'd already heard about the rash, so I rubbed stinging nettles into all of his bed linens. After that he recovered quickly and was on his way."

Great-Aunt Delia laughed. "I do admire your creative thinking, my dear, but it must come to an end now." She looked around, frowning. "If I weren't so cursed old, I'd oversee your debut myself,

but there's no question of it, I'm afraid. My bones won't stand for it." She winced as a woman behind her screeched a greeting at a friend. "Nor my nerves." She sighed. "No, it's Rosamond you're stuck with—and she's no great bargain. I've promised to add to the budget your father gave her for the Season—in exchange for a promise that she'll be on her best behavior. But I'll make no bones about it—her morals will likely last only as long as the money."

The older woman reached out a hand. Addy took it, marveling at how soft and fragile it felt, so at odds with her favorite relative's irrepressible personality.

"The situation is not ideal, my dear. You must make the best of it, and you'd do best not to dawdle over the matter."

Addy nodded, turning away so her great-aunt could not see the utter bewilderment she felt at her own predicament. Did she even want to marry? It was what was expected of her. It seemed her only path—especially if she ever hoped to reclaim her sister. She closed her eyes against the pain of missing that sweet baby grin.

But having daily witnessed a great love—could she marry without it? And could she risk all the potential torment that came with it—the same pain that had led her father to leave her and little Muriel?

She didn't know. She didn't possess the answers to any of the many questions that beset her. She only knew that she couldn't function with the weight of it all pressing down upon her.

Deliberately, she pulled in a deep breath—and let all the unanswered questions and worries go out with it. She had a Season in front of her—and two goals to pursue. She was going to listen to her great-aunt, explore what opportunities came and see where the fates led. And she was going to fulfill her mother's last request and somehow arrange a meeting with Hestia Wright—famed ex-courtesan and philanthropist pledged to help any woman in need. Exactly how she was to make that happen, especially without violating Great-Aunt Delia's rules, she wasn't sure.

Luck might be with her tonight, though, as the rumor in the receiving line had been that Hestia Wright was actually here tonight.

Addy could scarcely believe it, but the ladies were atwitter and the gentlemen were buzzing with delight. Perhaps she could just meet her here, exchange a few words in a situation that looked merely like a social encounter, and arrange the rest through the post? It would be wonderful indeed to make the woman's acquaintance and accomplish her mother's mission so soon.

She let her gaze drift, thinking she would surely be able to pick out the famous beauty. She'd seen her caricature in the broadsheets. Not the most reliable reference, but how many ravishingly beautiful blondes could be here tonight?

She eased to the left so she could search another section of the ballroom. Ah. There. An elegantly coiffed head of blonde hair, set aflame by the chandelier as if the light had been manufactured only for such a purpose. But the woman faced away from her. Addy waited and watched while she conversed with her group. The lady shifted to the side, moving with easy grace—

And Addy suddenly lost every sensible thought in her head.
Good heavens.

What was that?

Not what—*who*? She recognized the what—a man. A *nobleman*. Surely he must be the designated illustration for his kind—the ideal gentleman. Tall and slender, save for the wide breadth of his shoulders. Close cropped hair. Smoldering dark eyes over a finely crafted nose and a strong, stubborn-looking jaw. Almost unfair that any man should look so undeniably masculine—and yet utterly elegant at the same time.

Only one thing marred the perfection of the image; the cold, hard look on his face. It shouldn't be possible for a man to smile politely and at the same time look dark and brooding—yet he pulled it off. He laughed at something the blonde woman said, yet the laughter never climbed as high as those piercing eyes.

She wished—suddenly, fervently—that she knew why. It struck her—this man had seen things, done things, things that she couldn't yet imagine. That polite smile could not hide the message his eyes told the world—*I am capable of anything*. He would have *stories* to tell

—the thought perked her up, piqued her interest and called forth a stabbing jolt of longing.

Stories. Tales. Imaginings. They had long been her blessing, her companions—or her curse, if her mother had been asked when Addy lost herself again and forgot to stitch on her embroidery, dropped the count of the linens or paused, frozen with her fork raised and food forgotten.

But she'd lost their comfort. After her mother's death the words had dried up. Fantastic scenes had become colorless and dull. The fascinating people who lived in her head and her heart had disappeared

Now, staring at this handsome enigma of a man, she could imagine herself, curled up, in thrall, granted the privilege to hear *his* stories, to laugh with him over the amusing tales and soothe the sting of the painful ones.

The thought startled her and called to her at the same time—but she shook her head to dispel the silent pull.

It was ridiculous. She'd lost control. She willed herself to look away. Why was it suddenly so difficult? Good heavens, he was just a man—and she was perspiring, though she'd yet to dance this evening.

And then he met and held her transfixed gaze.

Nearly twenty years of innocence evaporated in a second. Suddenly Addy knew—for the first time—that she was a woman. Her heart sputtered, her body tingled and her womb awoke to send out a message.

Yes, please.

She reached again for the strength to look away. Too long. She'd been staring too long—when her Cousin Rosamond stepped abruptly into her line of sight.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, her tone furious. “Wipe that look off of your face right now, young lady!” She whirled around, gaze searching. “Who are you ogling in such an appalling, country-bred fashion?”

Addy flushed as Rosamond gasped and turned back. “Vickers!” she whispered in tones of horror. She looked to Great Aunt Delia.

“Mama, this stupid girl is mooning in public—over *Vickers*!”

Stupid? To react to such a man? It didn’t feel stupid at all, but eminently sensible. Inevitable, one might say. For one defiant moment, Addy considered challenging Rosamond to meet his gaze and remain unmoved.

But Delia was clucking her tongue. “Stop turning everything into a Cheltenham Tragedy, Rosamund.” She shook her head at Addy. “She’s right, though, child. You must learn to school your expression. You should not be indulging in such emotions, let alone allowing them to show on your face. That is not what making a marriage is about.”

“No, that comes later.” Rosamond preened. “If you are lucky enough to be made a widow.”

“At least you waited for poor Mitford to expire,” said Delia with a roll of her eyes. Her expression hardened as she turned back to Addy. “Nor should you feel such things about a scoundrel like Vickers. He’s a wickedly hard man, interested only in drinking, gaming, whoring and disgracing his family name. He’s nothing to offer a young debutante but trouble—so don’t tempt him into it.”

Addy nodded.

Delia pushed herself to her feet with the aid of her cane. “Rosamond, it’s your role to teach her such things. How can she learn to avoid the rakes and scoundrels if you are gallivanting about with a pack of them? Remember your promise. Stay here. Show her how to go on.”

“I will, if only to get this dull endeavor over with.” She shook a finger at Addy. “Now, mind my instruction and don’t make a fool of me, girl.”

Her great-aunt was scanning the ballroom. Addy’s heart sank as she indicated a younger, thinner, spottier gentleman. “There. Philpott’s heir will get the title and half of Hertfordshire besides. Go with Rosamond and obtain an introduction.”

Sighing, Addy followed. Titles and land came with this sort of young man, but no stories, she’d wager. Making her way across the ballroom, she steeled herself. She already knew what they would

speak of: the pranks of his old school chums, the triumph he felt over his new matched pair or the shining racing curricule he planned to commission. Only a few weeks in Town, just a few introductions to young gentlemen of her own age, and it had been the same with them all.

She sneaked a last glance back. Vickers. With that sort, she was certain, she would hear some hair-raising tales and likely live out a few of her own.

“*Adelaide!*” her great-aunt hissed.

Yes. Propriety.

She allowed herself one long, lingering look, then turned dutifully away to see what she could make of her future.

Chapter Two

Several weeks later . . .

The *ton* could not have ordered up better weather for their afternoon outing in Hyde Park. A brilliant blue sky, the sun just warm enough, and a slight breeze wafting through, pausing to ruffle the leaves on the trees and the hems of the ladies' skirts.

Vickers stood beneath the shade of a large oak and watched Society's glittering promenade pass. He felt the need to re-acclimate to light and gaiety again. The task he had set himself had led him lately into darker territories.

Following the string of his father's mistresses had not been a happy duty. None of them had gained the better of that particular bargain. He understood their plight. Who knew better, in fact, how much his father demanded of a person. How it felt at times as if he drained your very life away. How one was left bitter, dry and as empty as a husk after he'd done with you.

Anger and determination had grown apace as he searched them out. Most of the early ones he'd found in brothels and gaming halls. Many of them had been left tired and disillusioned, many too broken or unwilling to enter the demimondaine again. But the later ones? Some of them he'd found not at all. They grew more skittish and reticent, less willing to talk to him. A couple he'd found were unable to converse at all, lying insensate in gin halls or hovels.

He'd talked with all that he could, documented everything he could find, and let his father know exactly what he was doing. Then he'd done what he could for the poor souls, with his meager funds and with Hestia's help, but his anger grew as their predicaments worsened. Invariably, these women had been left in bad straits after dealings with his father.

Except for one.

Rosamond, widowed Countess of Mitford. She'd been his father's last mistress, as far as he could tell. She'd stayed with him for only a short time, at the beginning of the year—and it appeared she

was the only mistress so far to emerge intact and unscathed.

At first Vickers had thought the brevity of their affair accounted for it. But the further he moved along the list of mistresses, the more incensed his father grew. He'd sputtered and fussed at first, but then he'd begun to appear almost . . . panicked. Last night he'd threatened dire retribution should his son not leave off.

Which of course only heightened his ambition to see this through to the end.

Lady Mitford appeared to be the end.

And Vickers wondered if there was a reason she'd passed through the viscount's fire un-burnt—and if perhaps that reason might be what had catapulted the old man into leaving scolds and lectures behind and into making actual threats instead.

Vickers' old hatreds entwined with new excitement and flared high. He must find out what had his father so agitated. He had to talk to her.

But the notoriously accessible Lady Mitford had turned unaccountably shy. In the past she'd been eager to flirt a bit, and quick to hint at more. But now she passed him in Bond Street with barely a nod. She'd been 'out' during her at home hours yesterday and just happened to leave a ball immediately after his arrival last evening.

So today he lay in wait in the park, watching for her while a pack of his young contemporaries gathered around him to debate the merits of the passing ladies.

"Straighten up, chaps!" young Lord Beeton called. "Here's Mrs. Hervely!"

The group of young bloods grinned and bowed as the popular hostess, widely known for her fondness for initiating young men into the pleasures to be found in Society, passed in an open barouche.

"Who shall you dance with tonight, Beeton?" The conversation resumed as Mr. Nowell turned back to the group. "Now that Miss Jane Tillney is to be married, you'll have to find someone else to appease your mother."

"I don't know how I'll find someone else so perfectly available

and yet unattainable,” Beeton mourned. “Miss Tillney was the perfect foil.”

“Well, you cannot claim Miss Stockton,” Nowell avowed. “I’ve chosen her as *my* perfect shield. She has connections and an adequate dowry. She behaves beautifully, which should make my mother happy, but there’s that bit with her parents that makes Mother nervous. While I’m dangling about Miss Stockton, she’s afraid to push me too far. She’s leaving me be, and for that I’ll thank the girl a thousand times over.” He shrugged. “In any case, it’s no hardship to befriend her. She’s stunning, although it is an odd sort of beauty is it not?”

“She has a quick wit,” another young buck piped in. “You never quite know what she’s going to say, but it’s always spot on target.”

“I like that about her,” Nowell insisted. “But not as much as I like the fact that she gives off that same air of not truly looking for a leg shackle. Not that my mother needs to know that.”

“Maybe she only gives off that air around you, Nowell.” Beeton lounged against a tree. “She is a beauty, although of a different sort. All big eyes and dramatic brows and fresh innocence. Except for that plump bottom lip of hers. That pouty mouth is the only bit that doesn’t look like it belongs on one of heaven’s cherubs.” Vickers noted the glitter in his eye. “On the contrary, that mouth looks very devilish indeed.”

Nowell objected, but since he didn’t know the woman of whom they spoke, Vickers turned away and let the talk drift over him. He watched the *beau monde* parade slowly along, nodding to acquaintances and keeping his eyes peeled for Lady Mitford—when suddenly he realized the pups were speaking of her.

“What was that? About the Countess? Lady Mitford?”

Nowell huffed. “Never say you mean to edge in here too, Vickers. I just told Beeton that Lady Mitford will never let him near Miss Stockton. She’s a high stickler.”

“Lady Mitford is a high stickler?” Vickers repeated with disbelief.

“The girl is. Hadn’t you heard what they call her? The Celestial, because she’s as beautiful as an angel and as pure and well behaved. She never sets a foot wrong, that one, and Lady Mitford encourages it. The countess has quite reformed her own behavior as well. So, if Beeton is too wicked to warrant an introduction to the angel, that likely goes double for you. You’d both do best just to leave the lady to me.”

“I say Nowell is naught but a bag of hot air. You cannot claim a lady unless you betroth yourself to her, you nitwit. And the hell you say, in any case. I can charm the countess into doing whatever I wish.” Beeton pushed himself away from the tree. “See for yourself. The lady approaches now.”

Vickers looked up. Indeed, the countess did approach, in the midst of a group of ladies and gentlemen. He made a sharp gesture at Beeton. “Leave this to me.”

Both gentlemen objected, but Vickers quelled them with a glare.

“Damn it all, now none of us will have a chance,” Nowell complained.

“Speak for yourself,” Beeton bit out.

“I’m not stealing a march on either of you, for God’s sake,” Vickers snapped. “I don’t know which virgin you are going about and I don’t much care, either. You can have the cherub—I just wish to talk to the widow.”

“Good luck to you, there,” Beeton grumbled, slightly mollified. “Weren’t you listening? The wicked widow has been treading the straight and narrow this Season.”

“Then it is a good thing that I only wish to have words with her and hadn’t planned on tugging her up against a tree.” Shaking his head, Vickers left the group behind. Lady Mitford was almost upon them. Her attention was diverted as she laughed at something one of her companions said. He merged into the crowd milling in the opposite direction and let his gaze roam nonchalantly over the oncoming faces. When he lit upon the countess, he stopped.

“Lady Mitford. Well met,” he called.

Hats and bonnets turned. Let her avoid him now.

“Mr. Vickers. Good afternoon.” She did not look pleased.

“I vow, it’s been an age.” He gave her his most charming smile—a rare enough occurrence. Enough so that it set off a wave of whispers and giggles through her entourage. “How is it that we keep missing each other?”

“Just luck, I would guess.”

This time only one of her companions tittered.

“The worst sort of luck,” Vickers pressed on. “Let me remedy that now.” He bowed. “Lord Worthe’s engagement ball approaches. May I be first to solicit a dance?”

Looking seriously displeased now, she glanced somewhere behind her.

Vickers kept a polite smile fixed in place.

“You tempt me,” the lady responded at last. “But alas, I’ve an injury that keeps me from dancing for a few days.”

Gallantly, he refrained from pointing out that her injury allowed her to stroll easily enough in the park. Relentless, he continued. “Well, then, I shall look forward to sitting out a set in your fair company.”

He’d trapped her. She couldn’t escape now unless she failed to attend the ball altogether.

“Yes, of course.” Her face was set. “But we must move on now.” She glanced about her for support.

He faced the chorus of agreement with bland acceptance. “Until the ball, then.” He bowed again.

She nodded and pressed forward. The group accompanying her followed, parting and flowing around him like a river around a rock, while he stood, staring and musing, after her.

“She’ll avoid you if she can, you know.”

He barely glanced at the young lady who had detached herself from the tail of the group long enough to address him.

“Will she?” he asked thoughtfully.

“She must, I’m afraid. She cannot afford to fraternize with someone innocent maidens have been warned of.”

“Have they? Been warned off me?” He took a grim pleasure in the idea. “All of them, as a general rule?” Oh, how that would set his father aflame.

He looked to her for the answer, only to find the thought arrested by a cold, little frisson of shock.

A pretty girl, she was, the young lady who had stopped to speak to him. A very pretty girl, indeed.

The pause lingered. His mind needed a moment to absorb it all, to fight off the notion that he’d imagined her, that it must be a mistake—the idea that nature had fashioned such a creature.

Ice blue eyes smiled back at him from a lovely face—eyes of that pale color that seemed destined to be always accompanied by or edged in silver. Yet they looked just fine in a rim of thick, dark lashes too. Very fine. More warm and alive than Vickers would have predicted.

And yes, they smiled at him, those startling eyes, though the rest of her countenance displayed only that which was correct, calm and polite.

“Well, *I’ve* been warned off you, at any rate.” She grinned then, and bit her lip—her full lower lip that didn’t quite seem to match the sweet bow shaped upper one—and yet together they made an irresistible sight—a perfectly kissable mouth, just begging to be put to use.

Wait. Beeton had said something about a girl with an angel’s countenance and a devil’s mouth—one connected to Lady Mitford. Was this her? He looked her over again. She didn’t look angelic to him, with those wide set, slightly slanted eyes and those dramatic, gently pointed brows.

He racked his brain, but couldn’t come up with the name. He raised a brow instead. “And you are?”

Her color rose, just enough to tint her fair skin with a rose flush. “Oh, I am sorry. I’m being terribly forward, aren’t I? I hope you’ll forgive me—only, this might be my last chance, you see.” She dipped her head and bobbed a quick curtsy. “I am Miss Adelaide Stockton. Lady Mitford is my cousin. She is very kindly sponsoring

me this Season.”

Ah, so here was the reason for the countess’s sudden proper streak—and a distasteful burden it must be for her, too. No. Rosamond would not enjoy being held up for constant comparison to this girl.

He flicked a glance at her scrap of a bonnet, which did nothing to hide her thick, blonde hair or the length of her elegant neck. The girl stood taller than most, perhaps half a head below his own height. Slim, but with curves in all the most interesting spots. And her manner . . .

Vickers shifted, feeling himself on uncertain ground for the first time in ages—and somewhat annoyed about it. He had a reputation—hard won and well deserved. Damned useful, too. The *beau monde* saw him as a gambler, a spendthrift, and a rake of the highest order. Society’s older women loved him for it—or they stayed away. Innocents who wandered into his path usually sidled quickly away again, as if the stain of his wickedness might rub off on them.

They did not usually stare at him with frank assessment and open appreciation. They did not often run a searching gaze over him, from his short hair to his shining Hessians—and every spot in between.

And he did not usually react like a restless and jumpy, untried boy.

“Last chance?” he asked at last. “At what?”

He stopped, suddenly aware that this was the third—no, *fourth*, time he’d responded to her with a short, sharp question. So much for his vaunted charm.

“To make your acquaintance.”

Her gaze still roamed, scanning his shoulders and arms, following the lines of his waistcoat and moving on to widen again, as if measuring the width of his thighs.

“Is that what you are doing?” he asked wryly. “Making my acquaintance?”

She stilled and looked him in the eye again at last. “Yes, I hope so. But I admit, I am quite admiring you as well.”

He clamped his mouth shut. Safer to say nothing at all to something like that.

She shrugged. "One does hear so many things about you, Mr. Vickers. I am glad to find that at least one of the reports is true. You truly do inspire chill bumps, up close."

Surprise vanquished any remaining annoyance. He laughed. "I've heard about you too—heard that you are Perfection Itself. Though if I were to judge by this conversation alone, I might be skeptical."

"Perfection? No. Careful? Yes." She shuddered. "Who would want to be perfect? It sounds ghastly boring." She glanced up. "Though it's a relief to know there's at least one person in Town who knows I'm not."

Again, she kept her voice low and her expression polite. For all the people milling about and past them knew, they could be discussing the weather.

He had to admit, he was enjoying the farce. He lowered his tone, too. "And you? What do you inspire, up close?"

Some of the light left her face. "It would depend on just who you ask, sir. I've learned that Society looks at me and I am instantly dubbed either a saint or a sinner. Either way, the only thing I seem to inspire is caution."

"You continually surprise me, Miss Stockton. I felt sure the answer would be befuddlement."

"It's been known to happen," she said affably.

He narrowed his gaze and glanced at the group still moving off without her. "What else do they say about me?"

"Oh, many things. That you are quite wonderfully witty, but wicked with it. That you drink too much, gamble too much, and spend time with the wrong sorts of women."

He shot her a tight glance. "Let's add exasperation to the list of reactions. Do you always answer a question so directly?"

She shrugged. "Not lately."

He snorted. "Then I don't know whether to feel honored or annoyed. I'll wager that on further acquaintance you inspire even

more volatile responses . . . murderous tendencies, perhaps?”

She stilled and he thought perhaps he'd taken it too far. But no. She didn't look upset . . . but interested. Everything about this encounter had been novel—but that look of speculation? He was more than passing familiar with it.

The trees behind them shifted in the breeze just then and a stray shaft of sunshine lit her from behind. And in that moment he understood the reverence with which Nowell had spoken of her. Fair skin and fine form, wide blue eyes and the fresh look of a dew-kissed nymph—celestial indeed. Yet paired with that saucy humor and the hint of pain she'd revealed?

It all made an image that might have been specifically crafted to set his nerves on edge and his heart to kicking like an irritable stallion. To stimulate his senses and tug at his dusty, neglected heart strings.

He spoke quickly to shut off that line of thought. “Why did you say that Lady Rosamond cannot afford to interact with me? It's an odd choice of words.”

She blinked. Suddenly she looked around, peering past him to gauge how far her party had gone without her. “Odd, perhaps, but accurate.” She lifted a shoulder. “It's not really my place to speak of it.” She glanced askance at him. “What was it that you wished with her, sir?”

“Just a few words. I won't go into it now, it's quite a long story.”

She glanced at him with a curious look of yearning. “And one that contains pain, pathos and a bit of adventure, I'd wager, too.”

“What makes you say that?”

“All the best stories do. All you need now is a happy ending.” Her distracted gaze wandered south again. “What color would you call that waistcoat?”

Surprised, he glanced down. “I don't know.” He lifted a shoulder. “The color of eggplant?”

“Eggplant . . . Yes, that is a good word.” She shaped it with her mouth. Or perhaps, plum?” Shaking her head, she looked up and

continued. "Perhaps you and my cousin can exchange stories then, when you see her at the ball."

"When?" he asked with irony. "After that reception, I'd say the more likely choice of words would be *if* I see her at the ball."

She bit her lip. "You might be correct, at that." She raised a delicate brow at him. "But something tells me that would not be the end of it. I feel sure that you are more stubborn than Cousin Rosamond."

She looked ahead again and took a step away.

"Yes, hurry on." He waved a hand. "You are right. I am stubborn. Don't worry," he added ironically. "We will meet and talk again."

She stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. "Don't you see? I very likely should worry about that. But I don't."

With that cryptic statement, she turned and hurried away. Vickers watched until he saw her rejoin the trailing end of Lady Rosamond's party—without the countess ever knowing she'd been gone.

Thoughtful, he turned away—only to break out a real smile at the sight of Hestia Wright drawing close in her small, open carriage.

"Hestia! You're back!"

"Indeed." She returned his smile, but there was something . . . reserved . . . worried, perhaps . . . there too. "Would you care for a ride home?"

"I would, thank you." He climbed up and settled in the opposite seat. "And your expertise, too. Tell me everything you know about the Countess of Mitford." He settled in, throwing an arm across the back of the seat and making himself comfortable. "And her cousin."

Her first slip.

Addy listened to Rosamond fuss and fume and thanked Providence that Great-Aunt Delia had not accompanied them to the park. She'd done her best to follow the older woman's advice. She'd

spent these last weeks acting as refined as any properly well bred girl of the *ton*. She'd been everything quiet, prim and proper.

Until today.

A few minutes in Mr. Vickers' company and she'd reverted back to her old ways. Oh, she'd managed to hide all the excited flutterings he stirred up, and to quell the dozens of questions she was dying to ask. Where had he been these last weeks? Why did he look so solemn? How had he come by that tiny scar above the arch of his brow? She'd managed to swallow them all—but she'd acted too forthright, too outspoken, nonetheless.

"I vow, what is the good of being a widow if I still must act as if I were restrained by a leg shackle," Rosamond fretted. The group of her friends had dispersed and the two of them were now strolling home to Cavendish Square. "I know I promised strict propriety, but it's growing tiresome."

Addy's mouth quirked. "It hasn't done you any harm. The *ton* has applauded the mending of your ways for the sake of your family—and you still generate interest from men like Vickers."

"True." Rosamond preened, just a bit. Then she glared. "And yet it hasn't done you much good at all."

Also true. Parts of Society just couldn't get past the scandal of her parents' marriage—to them she'd always be tainted. The rest seemed willing to forgive and forget—especially after someone came up with that nickname. Then suddenly everyone wanted an introduction. The men clamored for dances, the ladies wished to be seen with her. But it was all so stilted and superficial. Everyone, be they friend or foe, seemed universally unwilling to look past her reputation to see the girl inside.

"It's not like I haven't tried," she protested. "Perhaps we've overdone it with the strictly proper behavior. They've dubbed me with that ridiculous name, and everyone who deigns to look past my family's past treats me as if I'm made of ice. Like that nice Mr. Nowell. He comes around and seems happy to spend a little time in my orbit, but . . . nothing goes beyond the pleasantries. Neither he—nor any of them—will ever take a peek beyond my outer surface."

Rosamond groaned. "Not you, too, with the astronomical talk. I realize Lord Worthe's lectures are popular, but his enthusiasm is slowly turning us all into scientists."

"He does make it all sound more interesting than I might have imagined."

"Never mind that. What am I to do at his engagement ball, when Vickers comes looking for his dance?"

"Dance with him?" Addy suggested.

Heaven knew she'd like to. And not just because he was beautiful and quick with a quip and made her feel quite out of her depth and a little reckless with it. There had been that moment when he'd accused her of inspiring murderous impulses—it sounded just like something her father would say and made her feel as if he, at least, had sneaked a peek and seen a bit of her true self.

"And risk my mother hearing of it? Vickers is still a rogue and a rake—and enough of an excuse for her to cut off our funds like that!" She snapped her fingers. Her tone turned aggrieved. "If you'd just hurry up and catch a husband!"

"I am trying."

But though enough of society wanted to *know* her, it seemed no one wished to *marry* her. The only gentleman to come up to scratch with an actual proposal had been Lord Nolan—and everyone in the *ton* knew that he was only looking for mother for his unruly brood. It was a measure of her desperate state that she'd actually considered him—until she'd mentioned adding her infant sister to his litter of six and he'd flatly refused.

Then, so had she.

"Try harder," Rosamond insisted. "As long as you have no prospects, I must behave like a spinster too. It's hardly fair, especially with a man like Vickers hanging about. I can only put him off for so long."

Addy nodded, but in her heart she acknowledged that her experience of the Season had nearly put her off the idea of marriage. Was this all there was? Dispassionate maneuverings for the highest title? Unacknowledged competition for the largest dowry? Social

niceties but no real interaction? It was all so discouraging and disheartening. No wonder her mother had dug her heels in and created a scandal until she won permission to marry the man she loved.

Addy didn't even have that option. No man she'd met had even come close to inspiring that sort of palpable reaction.

She brushed away a quick vision of Vickers. No use pinning any hopes there. In fact, more and more she'd been harboring rebellious thoughts about arranging a life on her own. She held back a sigh. The finances wouldn't be a problem. She could move back home, or even into the village house in the Cotswolds that had been part of her mother's marriage parcel. Her allowance would cover her and little Muriel very well. She could raise her sister as she'd been raised, with the real education and the wider outlook that her mother had wished her daughters to possess. She could have a garden, and her books, a few friends. Perhaps they could occasionally travel in to Town to visit the museums and the theater.

It sounded lovely and peaceful, and yet—it just wasn't done. Girls like her were set on one path—and it led straight to the altar.

Her family would object. Society would object. She'd be pitied . . . and possibly scorned.

And it still felt like her best alternative.

As difficult as finding a mate was proving to be, forging a life without one would be infinitely more so. For it to materialize into the slightest possibility, she'd have to manage the thing respectably.

She would need help. Such a departure would require a special situation, a great deal of persuasion—and if she was to have any chance at social acceptance—a veritable sparkling diamond of a pristine reputation.

She and Rosamond heaved simultaneous sighs.

Suddenly her cousin brightened. "Unless," she said with excitement. "What if Vickers has reformed as well? He hasn't been seen about much this Season. He hasn't been frolicking with the *demi-monde* or frequenting his usual gaming hells or the races. Perhaps his father finally won that battle and convinced him to give over his

rakish ways.”

“Then your dance will not be nearly as much fun,” Addy remarked.

“Oh, think larger, girl! What an interesting couple we should make. Only imagine the splash we cause in Society! How everyone would talk. We’d be on every guest list, for Seasons to come.” The idea kept Rosamond happy and occupied for several blocks. Until the intersection with Oxford Street, where she let out a horrified gasp and clutched Addy’s arm.

“Nooo,” she moaned. “Damn it all!”

Addy gasped. “Rosamond!”

“Oh, why?” her cousin groaned. “Why could it not have worked out the way I’d only just imagined it? It would have been perfect. But no—the willful man! Look!”

Addy searched until she spotted the problem. Vickers again. Her heart leaped, but he never noticed them. He was seated in a small, fast moving carriage, listening intently as an astoundingly beautiful woman spoke, half a smile on her face.

Confident. Competent.

Like bubbles the two words bounced their way up and out of her, popping onto the surface of her mind.

Virile.

Another one. She shivered, so startled and grateful she was. This was how it used to be, back when her stories lived just below the surface. When words and scenes and people jostled for space in her brain, kept her company and amused both her and her friends and family.

Suddenly she realized just what she was seeing. Vickers. With a beautiful, blonde woman.

“Wait!” Addy stared. “Is that . . .”

“Hestia Wright,” sighed Rosamond bitterly. “And if he’s still hanging about her skirts then he’s not changing his ways, after all.”

Hestia Wright.

“Do you not understand, Adelaide?” Rosamond had grown petulant again. “This means that I cannot keep company with him,

after all.”

“But his reformation was just an idea you struck upon,” Addy reminded her absently. “Your own invention.”

“Well, he should strike upon it!” her cousin exclaimed. “Truly, it would be the best of all worlds. I could keep the notice and acclaim I’ve had this Season, and still have a man like that at my side?” She sighed and continued, but Addy didn’t hear any more complaints.

Hanging about her skirts. Hestia Wright’s skirts.

Abruptly all the cosmos around Addy adjusted. Puzzle pieces clicked into place, almost audibly. Answers to questions slid home like the parts of a well-oiled lock. Perhaps, just perhaps, all of her hopes might come true. The dark, difficult horizon suddenly looked brighter, colored with a multitude of possibilities.

Suddenly, Addy couldn’t wait for Lord Worthe’s engagement ball.

Chapter Three

Addy dressed carefully for the event, choosing her wardrobe as carefully as a knight donning armor. Her violet gown might not stop a lance, but its fitted bodice displayed her curves perfectly and the color darkened her eyes and lent them a more mysterious hue.

She entertained the stray thought that what she should wear was one of those scandalously short, tight outfits she'd seen on the trick riders at Astley's Amphitheater. Tonight's work was certainly going to take a similar level of luck, balance and poise.

She tapped her foot, enjoying the lovely, celebratory air of the evening. Lord Worthe was only recently known to the *ton*, but Miss Jane Tillney was a favorite. Everyone's delight for the happy couple spilled out into the event. Addy had danced nearly every set, watching the crowd all the while, but she'd seen no sign of Vickers yet.

When she had a chance, she went to ask after Rosamond. Her cousin, making the most of the white lie she'd told in the Park, had commandeered a throne-like chair, from which she was holding court.

"Am I well?" she whispered behind her fan in answer to Addy's question. "Look about you! Somehow, turning Vickers away in the Park has made me more interesting to a number of other gentlemen!" Her eyebrows rose high in astonishment. "Who could have predicted it?"

"Who, indeed?"

"Even if Vickers hasn't reformed, things might grow a tad more interesting. Now," Rosamond said, raising her voice and tapping Addy with her fan. "I am growing a bit chilled. Would you fetch my shawl for me? There's a dear girl."

Addy heard someone ask about the scandal of her parents' marriage as she departed, but she didn't mind. Most everyone knew the tale and any suitor of hers must show himself quite above it. She delivered the shawl and positioned herself a bit apart, taking the opportunity to scan the crowd before her once more.

Which was why she startled so violently when the voice came from behind her.

“Good evening, Miss Stockton.”

With a gasp, Addy spun about. Vickers. He’d come from a shadowed corner near a servant’s doorway. Bright candlelight spilled over him as he stepped into the open, illuminating that marvelous bone structure and picking out the light flecks in his dark eyes.

“Good heavens.” He could have been a bold, elegant sculpture, come to life.

He stared and she knew a moment’s triumph when he seemed unable to look away from the embroidery trailing the neckline of her gown.

“I’m sorry,” he managed after a moment. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

She nodded, not quite able to return to normal, herself.

“I meant, rather,” he continued, “to ask if you would honor me with this dance.”

Now she stared—in horrified dismay. “What? Good heavens!” she repeated. “No! Absolutely not!”

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“No! Are you mad? You cannot dance with me.” Frowning, she cast a quick, furtive glance toward Rosamond. “That is—do you still wish to have that discussion with Lady Mitford?”

His brow furrowed. “Yes. It’s why I’m here.”

“Then you must not dance with me—or anyone else.” She pointed her chin in her cousin’s direction. “At least, not until you have procured her hand for a dance. If you hope for any chance with her, you must listen. Go now, before she sees you here.”

She started to reach a hand out toward him, but stopped herself in time. “If she rejects you, Mr. Vickers—”

He reared back, then glanced over at the countess, surrounded by her entourage. “She won’t reject me.”

“If she does,” Addy insisted. “Then you must only seem indifferent.”

“She won’t,” he repeated.

She only nodded. "Off you go. Be charming. Request the supper dance—or offer to take her for a slow stroll upon the terrace. Anything else and she'll turn you away."

She bit her lip. "Go on," she urged.

Still scowling, he took a step backward.

"Go," she waved him away. "Before she sees you."

With a nod, he turned away.

Addy settled in to watch. There. The scene had been set, and hopefully she'd established her role. Rosamond's actions were easy to predict. All she could do was wait and see if Vickers played according to the script.

"Dear me. Yes, I did promise you a set, didn't I?" Lady Mitford sounded almost bored. "I'm afraid I only have the supper dance left."

Vickers bowed. "I'd be honored to have the supper dance."

"But you see . . . my injury is paining me so . . . I meant to leave before the supper dance begins."

Vickers clenched his jaw. He had no need of the Stockton chit's advice. His natural inclination was to freeze out the Countess—who was obviously engaging him in a game he had yet to identify. "How disappointing," he drawled. Straightening, he gave her a nod. "Perhaps another time."

"Mr. Vickers," she said quickly.

"Yes?" It was a cold question asked over his shoulder as he'd already turned to go.

"Perhaps you might assist me to my carriage? When the time comes?"

He hesitated, tempted to punish her for the odd bit of cat and mouse she'd embarked them on. But he wanted to speak to her about his father quite badly. He stifled a curse and gave her a smile instead. "Of course. Until then."

He strode away fighting irritation—and trying to stifle a sense of intrigue. Turned down by two women in a matter of minutes. A first, even for the wicked, debauched Vickers. But while he felt sure he could beat Lady Mitford in whatever game she was playing . . . it

was her niece who sparked his interest.

What was she up to? Searching, he found her on the dance floor—where she quickly looked away after meeting his gaze. So. She was watching him. And clearly she was also—quite artfully—trying to manipulate him in some way. He found the notion appalling—and yet somehow adorable as well. Few men of his acquaintance possessed the stones and fortitude to take him on—and this pretty little girl not only made the attempt, she began to show some skill.

Adeptly she maneuvered herself throughout the evening, keeping him in her sights, watching him without seeming to do so. Really, he was almost charmed. As the evening wore on, he tired of the game and decided to take pity on her. He waited until the refreshment table was depleted and forgotten, then wandered over there—alone and in plain view.

It didn't take long until her seemingly random course through the room led her near.

Good girl.

He watched her come. On the whole, he was enjoying himself. Only one thing grated on his nerves. That look of dismay she'd displayed when he asked her to dance—that had been real. It bothered him. And as he'd spent years molding himself into a man who lived on cunning, controversy and confrontation, he acted in character. When he found a sore spot, he poked it.

Even when it was his own.

"So glad you found your way over here, Miss Stockton," he called. "There is still a bit of buttered crab here. Can I interest you in a bite?"

"No, thank you." She approached the table.

"Then perhaps we might have that dance?"

He waited.

Not long. The animation in her expression faded and those brows, like signal flags, lowered into a thundering frown. "We will not be sharing a dance, Mr. Vickers," she said.

Not the answer he'd been expecting. "Won't we?"

"We will not—and you must stop asking."

His own brows shot skyward. “Your family is quite hard on a man’s sense of worth. I would begin to worry I’d lost my appeal,” he drawled, “had you not been eying me like a hawk from a distance all evening.”

He thought he’d startle a blush out of her. Instead her face reflected . . . pleasure? And anticipation. He felt a stirring of something similar, starting down low in his gut.

“Drat. I thought I was being subtle.”

His interest in this strange, pretty girl just kept growing apace.

“You did well enough,” he answered begrudgingly. “But a man in my position learns to read the nuances in a room.”

She brightened. “A rare enough talent, but one I can appreciate.” Pausing, she crinkled her brow. “Your position?” she asked for clarification.

“Never mind. I assume there’s a reason behind the scrutiny—and this?” He waved a hand. “Besides the fruit tarts?”

“Yes. I’ve been hoping for a private moment.”

“We could have had that in a dance.”

“No, we could not. And I must not seem to be lingering with you, either.” She moved down the refreshment table.

He sighed. “The countess is not going to ask for my assistance when she departs, is she?”

She frowned. “Is that how she put you off?”

“Yes.”

“No. I have no doubt she’ll slip away while you are busy elsewhere.”

He stifled a surge of frustration. “What is it that you want, Miss Stockton?”

“I wish to offer my help.”

“With what?”

“In your mission with my cousin. My advice was sound, was it not?”

“Yes.” And completely unnecessary. He left that part out.

“It’s clear you want something from her.” She lifted a deviled egg and examined it.

“Only conversation.”

She set the egg back down on the platter. “The why of it may not be clear, but it will be difficult for you to get it.”

“For *me*?” Skepticism colored his tone.

“I’m afraid so. Especially for you.”

“Another blow to my self respect.” He considered. “I must assume that you mean to ask for something in return for your help?”

Now she flushed, just the smallest bit. “I had meant to propose an exchange, yes.” She picked up a tart. Her tongue darted out to take the smallest taste of the burnt cream adorning it. Her smile broadcast her approval.

It also shut down several of the working gears in his brain. Not too big a loss, though, as his body compensated, sending all that energy to set his gut to churning faster. And his lower bits to stirring, too.

He rolled his eyes. “I am struck with the sudden certainty that I am not going to like what comes next.”

“Very astute of you. But you wouldn’t like failing at your objective, either.”

He looked up as the current quadrille ended. “Miss Stockton, we cannot keep whispering over the *canapés*. Let us arrange a place to speak frankly.” His eyes roamed the room. “Ah. Yes. Wait fifteen minutes, then make your way onto the terrace through those doors. Wait in the far left corner. I’ll meet you there.”

He didn’t wait for her acknowledgement, but left the table and picked his way through the crowd to the newly engaged couple. His words of congratulations to Jane Tillney were heartfelt. She was a lovely girl and deserved every happiness. He kissed her cheek, shook Worthe’s hand and then left through the front door. Waving away the servants’ offers to find him a hack, he sauntered away, until half a block later he ducked down an alley and came back, letting himself in through the mews gate and approaching the house through a small, empty garden.

The girl was there. She stood in profile, her curves clearly outlined against the bright lights of the party, her aristocratic profile

only visible as an elegant shadow against the glow.

It was enough to settle a weight upon Vickers' chest, and to set his heart beating, as if it meant to throw the heavy burden off.

He moved in, staying in the shadows and stepping close to the broad, rough-hewn stone pillar supporting the corner of the terrace.

"Are you alone?"

She started and then laughed a little.

"Oh, how well you did that. I never saw you come." She nodded. "Yes. I'm alone. I acted out a dreadful coughing spasm until the courting couples abandoned the spot."

He smiled in the dark. "Good. Now, tell me what it is you want from me."

"A partnership," she responded instantly.

He waited.

"I can help you. I can convince Rosamond to speak with you."

"And what am I to pay for the price of this conversation?"

"You speak in the singular. Do you really expect to accomplish whatever it is you intend in one conversation?"

He recalled his earlier thought—that Lady Mitford might not even know what knowledge she possessed—what she might have seen or heard that was making his father so jumpy. "If I'm lucky."

"And if you are not?"

He remained silent.

"That's what I thought," she said smugly.

He wondered what that looked like on her angelic face.

"I'll convince her to speak with you, cooperate with you however you need. It won't be so easy, you know. Her situation is not so simple as it has been in the past."

"What's changed?" he asked.

"It would be foolish of me to tell you, wouldn't it?"

He was glad she was quick enough to realize it—and amused that she thought he wouldn't be capable of finding it out.

"And what will you require in return?"

She kept silent a moment and he realized she was making sure they were alone.

“First, you must give your solemn promise not to embroil the countess—or myself—in any sort of scandal.”

He stilled. “I’m sure you are aware, Miss Stockton, that what I am embroiled in is an ongoing battle.”

She rustled as she nodded. “I’ve heard a bit of it.”

“Then you must also have realized that scandal is my greatest weapon.”

“Nevertheless, you must agree to keep my cousin out of it.”

“And what else?”

Leaning down, she lowered her voice to an appealing rasp. “A meeting. I want you to arrange a meeting for me—with Hestia Wright.”

All the slow molten heat she’d awakened in his blood froze in an instant. He gripped the balustrade she leaned over. “Are you in trouble? In danger?” Girls of her sort did not generally speak of Hestia Wright, let alone pursue an acquaintance. He thought of Brynne Wilmott—now the Duchess of Aldmere—another aristocratic girl whose dire straights had led her to seek Hestia’s help just a short time ago.

“No. It’s nothing like that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She hesitated. “When you speak with her . . . to arrange things . . . tell her that I wish to pay a debt.” Another moment of silence. “Liliann’s debt.”

“Who is Liliann?”

“She will know.”

She was telling the truth. He heard it in her voice. He let go of the railing.

“I’ll prove the worth of my trade, if you wish,” she hurried on. “I’ll provide you a chance to speak to Lady Mitford, but you must do as I say.”

But alarm bells were ringing in Vickers’ ears. This was more complicated than a bold, pretty girl flaunting Society’s rules and flirting with a hardened rake under their noses. She didn’t even know what she was asking. How could they work together? He lived on

vengeance and anger, while she breathed light and innocence. The whole idea reeked of Trouble. Distraction. Chaos masquerading behind a curvaceous purple dress and an intrepid wit.

He had a mission. The work he'd dedicated himself to for so long. He couldn't allow himself to stray now.

But what if he did need her help? And what if she truly needed his? He'd been friends with Hestia too long to be able to abandon a girl in real need.

He cursed under his breath.

"Fine," he clipped.

She was still bent low over the railing, speaking earnestly. "Tomorrow evening. You must attend Lady Lisle's literary salon."

He groaned. "She favors *poetry*."

"And so does Rosamond. Be there. Be polite, attentive for a short, socially acceptable interval. No more. Don't try to engage her again."

Every feeling revolted. "I prefer the direct approach."

He could feel her smile in the dark. He was surprised her grin of triumph didn't light up the terrace. "If you knew Rosamond at all, you'd know that she does not." Reaching down, she touched his shoulder. He felt the warmth of that little grip from the top of his head down to his toes. "Trust me. I'll get you what you want."

For the first time since his eighteenth birthday, those words summoned an image of something besides his father's humbling defeat—reason enough to turn and walk away.

Instead he heaved a sigh. "Fine. We'll do it your way, the first time."

She was still smiling. He heard it in her voice. "And then?"

He stepped away so that her hand fell away from him. "And then we shall see."

Chapter Four

Miss Merry Vale's *Ode to the River Thames* stretched as long and twisted as the great river itself. Addy was as thrilled as the rest of Lady Lisle's guests to reach the end of it. But as the audience stood and began to file back toward the reception rooms, she merely switched seats. Leaving Rosamond in the company of Sir Harold Stobbins, she crossed the room and plopped herself down just behind Mr. Vickers.

Good heavens, those shoulders. They were even more impressive up close. Such a broad expanse of fabric reached all the way across his chair and intruded into the space allotted to his neighbors. If she had sat next to him instead of behind, would she even now feel the press of them against her?

The idea set her heart to thumping, but she refused to let it show. All about them people surreptitiously stretched and murmured low as they shook out benumbed limbs, but Vickers—and those shoulders—remained still and quiet.

Had he fallen asleep? He would likely not have been alone. Holding her breath, she leaned in close, listening for the sound of deep, even breaths.

"You owe me, Miss Stockton," he said suddenly, quite loud and clear.

She gasped and jumped and nearly fell from her chair.

"The balance of our agreement was mightily skewed when I was forced to listen to Miss Vale rhyme *life giving waters* with *druidic squatters*."

She laughed. "That was dreadful, wasn't it? But not as bad, I think, as *Saxon settlements* and *Roman betterments*." She frowned a little. "Did you hear the sound that went through the room at that moment? What would you call it?" She thought a moment. "A faint, pained moan? That adequately describes it, yes?"

He half-turned in his seat and her breath caught.

He was laughing.

And she was falling, into dark eyes brightened with amusement and a handsome face transformed by wry humor. What a difference it made in him. He'd been compelling before. He made her blood heat now. She urgently wanted to laugh with him. To shout in triumph or stand on her head or tell a thousand funny tales—anything to keep those eyes filled with light and matching the smile on his lips.

She didn't make any of those tragic mistakes, of course. Instead, blinking, she gathering her composure. "Lady Mitford is primed and ready to speak to you."

The smile faded and she took a stranglehold on her disappointment. He glanced over toward her cousin. "Are you sure? I thought she seemed unusually subdued today."

"She is, a bit. We had an unusually subdued conversation in the carriage on the way over. I promise, it has left her receptive to you."

Brow furrowed doubtfully, he watched Rosamond with Sir Harold. "I'll put my trust in you, then."

The words warmed her more than was likely wise. "Here's what you shall do. Go and fetch two drinks. Sir Harold will likely soon make the offer to do the same. You can move in once he's gone, and the conversation will go from there."

His mouth twitched. "You wish me to literally beat him to the punch?" He raised a brow. "I suppose it is a sound strategy." He stood. "Come?" He offered his arm. "I'll fetch you a glass as well."

She hesitated, wishing she could agree. But he had his goal and she had hers, and she'd already taken a risk, sitting here with him. "I'd like to, thank you, but I must resist the temptation. It wouldn't be wise."

He looked surprised . . . and perhaps a little insulted. "It's only a drink," he said with irony. "Nothing so binding as an actual set of dances."

Oh, she had wounded him, just a little. She felt guilty, but also a small, quick *zing* of feminine power.

Still, she should make him understand. "You said you'd heard my dreadful nickname, yes?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. “The Celestial, do you mean? Or are there more?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, that one. I know it’s ridiculous, but it’s also been helpful.”

“It cannot have been easy to live with,” he surprised her by saying. “You’ve far too much sass. My mind boggles at the picture of how many times you must have been forced to hold your tongue.”

There it was again, that warm rush. The comfortable feeling of being *known*. “You have no idea!” she laughed. “But as tempting as it is to shock someone with a bit of devilry, that sterling reputation is necessary to my plans. So, while I don’t mean to insult you . . .”

“You cannot be seen too often in the company of the wicked Vickers.”

She bit her lip and glanced over at Rosamond and Sir Harold. They were the only ones left amongst the seating as her cousin played up her imaginary injury. Everyone else had passed through the doorway open in the folding wall that allowed Lady Lisle to separate her long salon into two areas. “Perhaps I’ll just walk you to the door.”

He shrugged and offered his arm again. With a little thrill she laid her hand there.

An immediate flush started in her chest and began to climb higher. How warm he was! The heat surely affected her brain, because she began to imagine what that lean, strong arm might feel like without his linen and his very fine wool coat.

Too quickly—or at least before she could mentally remove any more of his clothes—they reached the end of the aisle. To the right stood the doorway, to the left a screen across a corner, presumably hiding a servant’s entrance. A pedestal stood between them, close to the screen, topped with one of Lady Lisle’s massive urns of fresh flowers.

As they approached, Addy heard a small cry and caught a glimpse of a shadow darting behind the screen—and saw the pedestal shift and the urn begin to wobble.

She opened her mouth, but before she could act, Vickers was there. He caught the fragile urn before it smashed to the floor.

Unfortunately he could do nothing about the wave of water that sloshed out, carrying with it nearly half of the carefully arranged flowers.

Addy jumped back, but the leading edge caught a section of her hem, wetting it through. From behind the screen came a gasp of horror and a stifled sob.

Vickers replaced the urn, but Addy approached the corner. "It's all right. Truly. Come out."

They waited. After a moment a young girl slunk from behind the screen, head down. Not a maidservant, as Addy had thought, but a gently bred girl, perhaps twelve years old, enveloped in a fine wrapper. She lifted her chin as two fat tears rolled down her cheeks. "I am so very sorry, miss!" Her eyes drifted over Addy's gown and the tears started flowing faster. "Oh, your beautiful gown! I *do* apologize. I know I ought not to have come down and now look at what I've done!"

"No, don't fret!" Addy hastened to reassure her as she wrung out her hem. "It's only water. It will dry."

But the girl caught sight of the mess on the floor and began to sob in earnest. "It was wrong, I know, but it was only—"

The rest grew unintelligible.

"You wished to hear the poetry?"

The girl nodded and valiantly tried to stifle her tears, but the sight of Vickers seemed to be the last straw. "Oh, Mama will b . . . b . . . be furious!"

"Nonsense," Addy interrupted. "No one has seen you save for the two of us—and we will certainly not spread the tale."

This did not have the beneficial effect she'd hoped for. The crying continued.

"Come now," Addy said desperately. "This is not so bad! Have you not heard of the royal princess, locked in a tower, who vowed to hurl flowers down to her favored suitors and urns down upon the heads of those who displeased her?"

That stopped her for a moment. "No," she said on a hiccup.

"The princess had such a temper, she filled the courtyard with

pottery shards before she found a man worthy of a posy. At once, she set him a series of tasks he thought he'd never complete."

The tears dried up. "What were they?"

"Why don't I tell you while you and I gather up the stems and Mr. Vickers goes to fetch a servant to wipe up the water?"

The girl nodded. Addy raised her brows at Vickers, who stared very hard at her for a moment, then started off. "After she tossed him a lovely stem of lilac, the princess told her swain he must climb a far off rock face . . ."

The story ended as they pushed the last of the flowers back into place. "Now, you can run back upstairs with no one the wiser," Addy told the girl.

"Thank you, ever so much." The child curtsied, then gave a nod past her—and Addy turned to find Vickers returned and watching them. His curious expression caught her, and she stared, trying to decipher if it was heated or soft, or an odd mix of both. Behind her the girl slipped away and they were left in a stretched, taut silence.

His gaze left hers and ran over her, as heavy and tangible as if he touched her all the way down. "I begin to think that the young bucks are right and you are indeed perfect. How on earth did you come up with a story that so exactly fit her needs?"

"It's an old talent," she said faintly. "It's easier to reassure someone when you know them, and understand what they want to hear. But this was easy. She needed to hear it would be all right, that everyone makes mistakes. I just told her in a different way." Musing, she continued. "It's harder when you wish to scare someone. Then you have to know what they don't want to hear—or make a good guess."

"Well, it was impressive."

If she'd been the fainting sort, she would have fluttered at the trembling wave that passed over her. "Thank you."

He took a step backward toward the doorway.

Before she knew what she was about, she reached up and gripped his upper arm.

"You were right, I do perhaps owe you something more,

tonight.”

He waited.

“I know I said that Rosamond must tell you her story, but perhaps it will help you to know it.” She shifted. “It might help her as well.”

“I’m willing to listen.”

Reluctantly, she peeled her fingers away. The girl was gone, but Lady Lisle’s guests lingered just beyond the wall and Rosamond and her knight sat across the room, yet somehow their situation felt strangely isolated. Addy breathed deeply, calming herself, concentrating as she always did before launching into a story.

“Death is an odd thing,” she began.

“Wait.” He frowned. “I thought you were going to tell me about Rosamond.”

“I am.” She frowned back. “Don’t interrupt.”

“Well it’s a strange way to start, and an off-putting description in any case. People might say that death is tragic or unexpected or heartbreaking—but odd?”

She sighed. “Just listen. But perhaps I should say instead that people’s reactions to death can be odd.”

“Better,” he nodded.

She rolled her eyes. “My mother’s death, for example, was crippling to us all. It was unexpected and beyond tragic. It broke my heart and disrupted the course of my life—but it nearly killed my father, as well. It left my baby sister without a mother and stole my —”

She paused, stricken, but he only waited a moment before prompting her. “Your what?”

How could she explain? Losing her mother had been devastating, and her greatest ability to comfort herself had disappeared as well. Her inner landscape had crumbled to dust. She’d felt hollow and empty for a long time—and with a shock, she realized that tonight she’d at last begun to lose herself in the telling of a tale again.

“My . . . peace,” she answered at last. “In contrast, Lord

Mitford died a bit before Mama did—and Rosamond had a very different reaction. It was as if my mother's death locked us all in a vault of grief, but the earl's death meant freedom to Rosamond."

He nodded. "I can see that. I didn't know Mitford well, but he seemed a sour old gull."

"He was. I found him to be a harsh man. I know the title and the wealth must have been hard to resist, but I am surprised her family encouraged the match, and I'm not sure why Mitford would wish to marry a woman so full of spirits and playfulness—and then attempt to remove every trace of it." Her mind drifted back to those dark memories. "I didn't see much of Rosamond, but it was enough to see that she was miserable. At one point I remember thinking that the earl must have enjoyed making her unhappy, so thoroughly did he pursue the job."

Vickers' expression had gone distant. "She must have wished for his death."

"Perhaps. I don't know, but I do know that it came as a relief. And after her mourning was over, I think perhaps she went a little wild with sudden freedom."

"I did see her from time to time, in my own circles." He raised a brow. "And as you are obviously aware, they are considered to be fast and loose." He glanced over to Rosamond and her laughing companion. "But that does seem to have changed, since she's been sponsoring you, has it not?"

"Yes. She was resentful of me at first. I don't think she expected such a change in how she's been received, either. I believe she'd become accustomed to the idea of being labeled a wicked widow—and chose it as a happy alternative to her former misery. But now . . ." She waved a hand. "She's getting a different sort of attention from the *beau monde*, and perhaps has other options that she hadn't expected." She darted a quick glance across the room. "She's found herself at an unexpected crossroads."

"I understand." But he was frowning down at her.

"We all face crossroads in life, but they are rarely comfortable places to be," she said with a smile. "So I hope you will treat her

gently.”

He nodded, but the distance was back, clouding the new brightness from his eyes.

She shouldn’t ask. It was no business of hers. But the darkness in him now, so different from the light the laughter called forth earlier . . . it broke her heart. “Have you ever wished for someone’s death?” she whispered.

Focus rushed back into his face with sudden, cruel clarity. “My father’s, do you mean?”

“I’ve heard the gossip.”

“No,” he said flatly. “I’ve never wished him dead. He deserves to live on—in more misery than even your cousin could imagine.” He gestured. “Sir Harold shows signs of leaving. I’d best fetch those drinks.” He moved away, but paused in the doorway. “Thank you,” he said over his shoulder. Then he was gone.

Unexpected emotion welled inside her. She’d done it. It had come back. That story of the princess had popped up, perfectly suited to the circumstances and a joy to tell. Pleasure, relief, gratitude—they lifted her soul as she watched Vickers go—and hey brought with them a rolling swell of rich and vivid scenes. Like waves they rushed her, one after the other. A man staring far out to sea, a boy straining to make his father look at him, a girl in a corner, wrapped up in a book of poetry. New people, new characters to perhaps coax out the old.

“No,” she whispered. “Thank *you*.”

Vickers did tread gently with Lady Mitford. They laughed together as they shared the drinks he’d brought. He dusted off his roguish charm and kept the conversation light as they compared outrageous stories and gossiped about mutual acquaintances. When guests began to trickle back in, taking seats for the next round of literature, he carefully broached the subject of his father.

She grew a bit pink. “Yes, there was talk earlier this year, I know, but it was mostly unfounded,” she hurried to assure him. “We did spend a little time together, but it was mostly in pursuit of a . . . project.”

“Project?” he frowned.

“Just a small thing, really.” She grew more visibly nervous.

“Just the connection of some of his acquaintances with some of mine.”

Sir Harold returned then and eyed the seat Vickers occupied.

He wanted to howl in frustration—or plant the interfering ass a facer. Scowling, he stood instead. “Yes, of course.” He bowed to Rosamond. “Perhaps we could meet again. I would like to hear more about your project.”

She shook her head. “You must discuss it with your father, if you wish to learn more.” She tossed him a dismissive nod.

Disgruntled, he turned to go.

“Mr. Vickers,” she said suddenly. “I did enjoy our conversation.”

“As did I.” He didn’t linger. Making his way against the incoming crowd, he exited the performance area. A casual glance failed to show any sign of Miss Stockton, and he wondered if that was deliberate.

Damnation. A few minutes more and he might have discovered something of value.

His father was agitated. The countess was nervous. There was definitely more to this than appeared on the surface. Frustrated and knowing that he could accomplish no more tonight, he called for his coat and left. A footman offered to find him a hack, but Vickers shook his head and set out on foot, breathing great draughts of the night air to help to clear his mind.

A setback then, but not an entirely unexpected one. He calmed as he walked. He’d learned to be patient, to play the long game. He would persevere.

And something else distracted him—the sting of Miss Stockton’s rebuff. So the Celestial could not be seen spending time with the wicked Vickers, eh?

It shouldn’t bother him. He should be grateful. His reputation had cost him a great deal of wasted money, a good portion of no-doubt-pickled-liver, and more miserably hung-over mornings than he cared to count. But it had its uses. The preventative fending off of

innocent misses had always been one of the most valuable.

Until now.

She'd spoken of plans. He wondered what she meant. Marriage, no doubt, but to whom? A high stickler, perhaps. He stifled the urge to throttle the unknown fellow.

He would need to speak again with the countess. Doubtless that would mean also speaking again with Miss Stockton. Watching the sky over the park in Bedford Square, he saw not the grey expanse lined with the shadowed outlines of trees, but blue eyes rimmed with black—and knew he did not feel nearly as irritated as he should.

Chapter Five

He waited impatiently for a glimpse of those blue eyes two days later, when he picked Miss Stockton up in a hired hack. He'd had a note delivered, via a grubby young acquaintance, asking her to slip away early this morning, and to meet him on the corner of Bolsover and Margaret Streets.

He fretted until the hired carriage arrived, worried she wouldn't make it, or that she'd have to be convinced to ride out with him, but there she was, waiting. Seeing him in the hack, she hopped right in. In under a few seconds they were on their way.

He had to admit, after her unwillingness to be publicly associated with him, her easy trust called up a wave of surprisingly warm gratification.

"I have to thank you for the notion of the plain brown cloak and basket over my arm. I vow, not a soul looked my way the entire two blocks! How did you learn such a neat trick?"

"A friend described it—or a friend of Hestia's, I should say. But you must take care. You might be ignored as a servant in Mayfair, but anywhere else in the city you'd just be a girl alone."

She nodded.

"How did you get away?" he asked.

She grinned. "The groom my cousin assigned to go about with me has a fondness for dice."

He snorted. "A great many of them have a fondness for dice."

"Well, Henry is shockingly indiscreet about it. He gets up a game everywhere we go. I once had to wait outside my modiste's for nearly thirty minutes because he was 'on a streak.' I won his gratitude when I didn't say anything about it at home." The bottom corner of her mouth, wider by just a bit than the top, quirked upward. "This morning I slipped out to the mews, where there always seems to be game going. I gave him half a crown and told him I'd appreciate it if he could double it for me, and that I'd share the profits." She gave a little laugh. "I could walk to Portsmouth and back today and he'd

have no notion.”

“I’m impressed,” he said with a nod.

He was pleased that she didn’t ask a lot of questions, too, although his note had mentioned the meeting she’d requested and he supposed that was all that truly needed to be said.

Instead she bounced about on her seat for a few minutes, watching out of the window, then she’d settled back, sitting very straight and inexplicably closing her eyes.

She wasn’t asleep. He sat back to watch her, trying to pin down all the things that made her different from so many other Society girls. Even now, despite the rough ride and the indifferently sprung carriage, she charged the very air, made him feel . . . stimulated. Present and interested in a way that he usually only felt when he was engaged in some battle with his father. He didn’t even know what she wanted with Hestia, but he was content to have helped her, secretly pleased to be sitting here amidst the swirl of her fresh scent, a part of the anticipation and light and color she brought with her.

He leaned forward suddenly. Her eyes were still closed, but her mouth was silently moving. He watched closely, listened hard and eventually made out a word here and here.

Fraught, she mouthed. *Heavy*. And a few minutes later . . .
Laden.

He frowned, wondering. It felt odd to think that a mere few days ago he hadn’t known her.

He still didn’t know her.

Oh, but he wanted to.

“Would you answer a question?” he asked suddenly.

Her eyes popped open. “I think so,” she said cautiously.

“What—in the name of all the circles of hell—are you doing?”

She bit her lip.

He wished she wouldn’t. Beeton had been right, it was such a continual distraction, that sultry pout in the midst of her innocent face. It kept reminding him of all the dark and lascivious things a mouth like that was meant to do.

"I will answer," she said slowly. "But only if you promise not to speak of it to others—or to judge me too . . . silly."

"I won't speak of it," he promised. "But do you want an honest answer about the rest?" He shrugged. "I'll try not to."

She struggled a few moments and he watched, fascinated, at the antics her eyebrows got up to as she made her decision.

"Very well. But first, let me ask you . . . Have you ever felt like the very air about you was full—filled with something besides the normal gases—almost alive with emotion . . . or potential?"

Vickers kept his face blank. It was how he felt whenever she was in the vicinity. He nodded.

"That's what today is," she said in a rush. "It's . . . significant. Maybe the beginning of something. Perhaps the end of other things. Definitely a day to remember. So I am thinking . . . trying to find the right words . . . so I can tell the story."

She looked so earnest, and a little shy. Here it was, another layer, another fascinating aspect to the girl. Why did she have so many, when every other girl appeared to be exactly the same beneath the surface?

"The story?"

"The story of today." She grew a little wistful. "I sometimes think I should have been born into a native tribe in the Americas, or perhaps long ago, in the days of the minstrels and the bards." She smiled a little sadly. "I believe stories are so important. Since I was little they've been my passion, my escape, the viewer that helps me see the world and sort it into place. More than that, our stories tell us so much, about ourselves and others, our history. They are mirrors, and they reflect the most important aspects of an event or a person."

After a moment she continued. "For a time, I lost them. But the hurt and the numbness are fading. At last the words are coming back, the scenes and the ideas." She reached across to grip his hand. "Today's story is going to be important to me—and I'm very glad you are a part of it."

He held still, not wishing to frighten her, but he wanted suddenly and quite fiercely, to hear her tell a story. He didn't care

what sort. He'd listen to anything.

He didn't ask her, of course. He merely visualized it, imagined sitting at her feet, watching that expressive face convey as much as her words must, growing quite envious of the entertainment, the pleasure and the escape anyone privileged enough to hear her must feel.

His reverie was broken, thank goodness, when she leaned forward with a cry of surprise. "Kennington Lane?" She glanced over at him with a strange mixture of pleasure and pain. "Are we going to Vauxhall?"

"Yes." He'd wondered at Hestia's choice. "Do you know why?" Her eyes shone. "It's part of the story."

He held his breath as she cocked her head. "Would you like to hear it?"

He nodded, not trusting himself to reply.

"Very well, but I place my trust in you," she said with a tilt of her head. A blonde curl escaped at the movement and draped along the curve of her nape. "My parents are infamous enough. I would rather not have the intimate details of their scandal making their way around Mayfair."

He raised a brow. "I've acted in more unsavory ways than I care to count, in pursuit of my goal, but I have never broken my word." His gut tightened at the sudden image of another trusting girl, and the flash of memory and pain that went with it. "Not intentionally."

She nodded. "That's good enough for me."

The knife in his belly twisted. Such simple words. Why did they stab so unexpectedly deep?

"I'm sure you know some of the tale. It was famous enough in its day and it gained new life when I arrived in Town this spring."

"I know your mother was betrothed to Lord Rowland, a man much older, with a title as well as a fortune, but that she had already fallen in love with your father. She ran away, did she not? There were rumors of Gretna."

Her mouth quirked. "They were much more clever than that."

She paused for effect. “Or Hestia Wright was, I should say.”

“Hestia? I’ve never heard her name linked with this particular gossip.”

“That’s because she’s clever, as I said—and because she had no wish to be linked.” She grew serious. “My mother met her in Vauxhall. She’d come with her family and with her betrothed, but she was alone and in tears after confronting Lord Rowland and begging him to release her. Unfortunately, he was determined and insulting and even a bit cruel. Mother ran away down the South Walk and hid, sobbing behind a tree. I don’t know how it started, but she met Hestia, and poured her heart out. Before the night was out, their plan was born.”

“I can only imagine, given it was Hestia at the wheel.” He shook his head.

“Mother ran away. Everyone knew she was pining for Father, but when it became clear that neither her betrothed nor her father would budge, he had left Town. Nevertheless, something she said to her maid convinced the girl that they were for Gretna. My grandfather took off in a rage, following.”

“But he didn’t find them.”

“No. Hestia had hidden Mother safely away. She never would say where, no matter how I asked. They waited for her father to come back. He did, still angry and frustrated, and he rode straight for my Father’s estate to confront him.”

“Let me guess.” Vickers knew how Hestia’s mind worked. “He knew nothing of the scheme.”

“He hadn’t even had word that Mother was missing. Soon they were both frantic with worry.” She grinned. “And that’s when Hestia began to deliver Mother’s demands.”

He choked back a laugh. “Her demands?”

“Yes. She refused to come home until Lord Rowland acknowledged that he’d been jilted—and she’d been given permission to marry Father.”

“And it worked?”

“After a bit of time passed. My grandfather finally capitulated,

but he also washed his hands of her. I never met him before he died.” She looked out the window, suddenly sober.

“Tell me about your parents,” he asked quietly.

Swallowing heavily, she did. She kept the topic light, speaking of her mother’s interactions with the nearby villagers and the ongoing, escalating war of pranks she engaged in with her father. He laughed at her charming tales, and he felt her pain when she spoke of her mother and the sister that lived now with that estranged part of her family. She lost herself in the telling, and he gladly followed, as she brought all the love and sorrow they’d shared to life as she spoke.

When she’d finished, he shook his head, coming back to reality as if he’d been dreaming.

She misinterpreted the motion. “Oh,” she exclaimed, stricken. “How I’ve been prattling on! I do apologize. It just . . . it felt good to be reliving those memories and sharing that way once again. I suppose this was an example of telling the story the teller needed to hear, instead of the listener.”

“Don’t apologize,” he said roughly.

“But I’m sure you’ve no care for a girl’s meanderings.”

“No. Please . . . You have a gift, Miss Stockton. I feel privileged that you would share it with me.”

Her cheeks reddened quite fetchingly.

He scooted on his bench until he sat directly across from her and then he leaned in close. Her color deepened again, but he was intent upon his message.

“I mean it. Don’t apologize for making use of your talents. I saw what you did for that child at Lady Lisle’s salon. You eased her fears and took her mind off of her transgression and distracted her until she could see the way out of her predicament.” He let loose a quick, ironic breath. “All the fates know that I’m a man with more than enough troubles on my mind—but you just made me forget them. You painted a lovely picture of innocence and caring and I stepped right into it with you. Not only did I see your youthful happiness, but you took me back to the joy of my own.”

He sat back. “I thought I’d forgotten. I thought all the

happiness of my youth had been destroyed by what came later. It is a very great gift to find I was wrong.”

She gave a rueful laugh. “Not everyone feels that way about my stories. My tendency to drift off into my head was often a trial to my parents.”

“Nonsense. It’s a wonder. You create ease and pleasure and joy out of nothing but your own thoughts and imagination. It seems a miracle to me—but perhaps that is because I have no creative talents myself.” He looked away. “Or because my focus is so often aimed toward destruction, rather than creation.”

She sat back as well—and crossed her arms in front of her, in a way that lifted and framed her bosom quite fetchingly. “Now I cry nonsense.”

He blinked—but didn’t look away.

“You asked about me, found out what you could, when we made our bargain, did you not?”

He didn’t confess that he’d done just that—even before she’d made her proposal.

“Did you think I would not do the same? Everyone is perfectly willing to gossip about you. With delight, they whisper of your women and your gambling. There are rumors of duels and many anecdotes of your deliberate attempts to antagonize your father.” She tilted her head. “I paid close attention. Those stories have grown rather dated, haven’t they?”

He said nothing.

“The only recent stories I heard were from Jane Tillney. She told me how you’ve helped Hestia in her charitable efforts. Her delight came from a story of you turned hijacker—when you stole a carriage of young girls, *children*, from a procurer who meant them for the brothels.”

The warmth that she’d sent flowing in his veins began to feel prickly and uncomfortable. “She should not have told you that.”

“Why? Because you only wish the world to see the most tarnished version of yourself?”

“I have my reasons.”

Her arms unfolded and she leaned in, much the way he had done to get his point across. "I'm sure you do. I won't pry into them. But there's something I wanted you to know."

The heat inside him was turning sultry again. She sat so close and the fresh, sweet scent of her drifted over him. The ice had vanished from her eyes. They'd gone wide and soft and he had the stray thought that he might fall into such inviting, dangerous waters.

"You speak of my talents, but I see that you possess a few of your own. You speak of reading the nuances of a room, but I believe you are a far better judge of people. You have a remarkably clear eye. You see a person for who he really is."

He frowned. It was true. He did quickly see past most people's worldly trappings. He put together what he knew with attitudes and actions, small and large, and he often gained a good picture of their strengths and weaknesses, their fears and hopes. It gave him a great advantage in cards, in the betting books—and in the manipulations and maneuverings he undertook against his father. But nobody had ever caught him at it. Hestia had never mentioned it. "How did you —"

"You did it to me. No one else in Society, during this entire Season, really looked at me. Child of scandal or The Celestial, they see what they want to see. No one else has a clue about the girl with the saucy tongue and the penchant for causing trouble and telling stories to get out of it."

The discomfort swung back and mixed with desire. She was too perceptive. He felt entirely too exposed. They were trapped together in this small space, so close. She smelled delicious and she looked even better, with her color high and her mouth pursed in earnestness. The light streaks in her hair matched the silver flecks in her eyes.

But she wasn't finished. "I wanted to tell you—"

He couldn't take any more. He reached across and ran a finger along the curl that draped her neck.

She fell silent.

His hand drifted up, cupped her jaw.

Her breathing ratcheted higher.

He leaned forward and kissed her.

He'd done it to stop her, to save himself embarrassment and further unmasking. He'd done it to regain control—of himself and of their careening relationship.

Which made this kiss a colossal failure.

His vast experience failed him—for this, this was utterly new.

He let loose the reins. He released all the urgency burgeoning in him and pressed his mouth to hers.

It didn't frighten her. She kissed him back, tasting of shining innocence and sweet, fiery response. Measure for measure she met him, countering his darkness, hurt and anger with light and life and willing eagerness.

Her hand was at the back of his neck. His had traveled down. One rested on her shoulder, the other clung to her waist. The air around them was alive again. Hungry yearning coursed through him, connected them with something more ancient and elemental than mere touch.

He deepened the kiss. She responded with a little moan, inching closer. It sent unexpected pleasure bursting inside him, like fireworks over the gardens they headed for. Sensual heat pooled in his belly.

More. It wasn't enough. He wanted to drown in her fresh scent and shining light. He wanted to bury—

No.

Breathless, he pushed away from her. That had gone stupendously, earth-shatteringly wrong.

She looked as dazed as he felt.

"I'm sorry," he choked out.

She merely shook her head.

He moved away, gazing out of the window while he wrestled his pounding heart, his pulsing flesh and his ragged breathing back to normal.

Suddenly he leaned forward and slid open the window. "You mentioned a debt to be paid?" he asked.

“My mother’s.” She swallowed. Her hands were busy patting her hair, touching the closures of her spencer, feeling along the ribbons of her bonnet as if she couldn’t believe she’d been left in the same state as before.

Clearing her throat, she continued. “She charged me with the mission before she died, although truly, it’s mine as well, is it not? Without Hestia Wright, I would not be here today.”

He felt a pang. Not the intense physical response of moments ago, but the same sort of sharp ache that he’d had when he’d thought about not knowing her just days earlier.

“Well, here’s your chance to thank her,” he said as the carriage began to slow. “We’re here.” He slid over so that she could have an unobstructed view out the window. “Welcome to Vauxhall.”

* * *

Good heavens. Well, let that be a lesson to her. She’d poked the dragon and he’d kissed her back.

He’d done it to distract her, to shut her up, much in the same way that she’d used that story to dissuade the girl at the *salon*.

Which didn’t make it any less wonderfully devastating.

So many implications and consequences, that kiss, both close and far-reaching.

Most of them she’d deal with later, but for now she had to fight to see in front of her, to notice that Vauxhall showed to beautiful advantage in the light, with the tips of the trees bright with sun and the triumphal arches shining.

Trying to rally, she looked about. It was lovely, but so empty. Their footsteps echoed on the cobblestones. How wonderful it must look, cloaked in the magic of the night, and lit with the famous lanterns. Vickers appeared to be perfectly at ease now, damn him, but she struggled to remain calm as he pointed out to her the wonders of the art and the walks and the infamous Grove, with its supper boxes and orchestra hall.

Yet still she clung to him a bit when he led her to the top of the

South Walk. There, partway down, a table sat in the shade of a tree. It had been laid with a sumptuous tea. Hestia Wright sat there. Spying them, she stood and beckoned them closer.

He let her go alone, for which Addy was grateful. On slightly unsteady feet, she approached until she was mere feet away from the stunningly beautiful woman.

Hestia Wright smiled kindly and covered the last bit of distance. "I can see why they've saddled you with that nickname." She stepped close and ran a finger across her cheek. "You are the most beautiful combination of both of your parents, my dear."

Belatedly, Addy curtsied. "I've heard about you all of my life," she whispered.

"Have you?" Genuine surprise showed on Hestia's lovely face. "Well, that does make things easier."

Addy followed her to the table and sat where she indicated. She watched as the other woman unhurriedly prepared the tea.

"She always spoke of you. Even when I was little, she named you the one who made their happiness possible." She took the cup Hestia handed her. "She explained it all, once I was old enough to understand."

"She always was a courageous woman, your mother." Hestia stopped stirring her tea. "I was very sorry to hear of her passing."

"Thank you." It came out a whisper. A near thing, but she didn't cry. "She followed the news of you. She said it gave her a thrill to think of you leading such a grand, glittering life. And when you came back—when you opened Half Moon House—she was so proud. She felt like a part of your legacy."

"She was a part of it," Hestia said quietly. "I never forgot your mother, my dear. She was the first. I couldn't help myself, could never recover all that I'd lost, but I could help her find happiness. I'm so glad it lasted."

"You inspired her." Addy felt a little shy, sharing this, but she forged on. "When she heard of your work here in London, she began a ladies charitable league at home. The women of our village worked together to remove less fortunates from the parish poor house. They

found them a place or saw them trained for something better.”

Now Hestia looked as emotional as Addy felt. Her hand shook a little as she raised her cup. “That is the highest compliment she could have paid me.”

Reaching for the reticule at her waist, Addy removed a velvet-covered box. She set it on the table. “It’s yours now.” She nodded. “Open it.”

With a questioning look, Hestia did. “Ah.” She tilted the box so that the morning sun set the rubies within to sparkling. “Lord Rowland’s betrothal gift. I heard about it, but never saw it. She said she meant to return the set.”

“She tried. Lord Rowland would not take them back. He said they were tainted.”

Hestia shook her head. “He was foolishly consistent, from beginning to end.”

“Mama never wore them, of course. She showed them to me just before she passed. Officially they were left to me in the will, but . . .” She had to pause. “She asked me to find you, to give them to you. She wanted you to use them to help another girl like her.”

Very gently, Hestia closed the box. “Your mother was a very fine woman.”

“She always said the same about you.” Addy gathered her courage. “Which is why I won’t hesitate to ask for your help, in much the same way my mother did.”

Hestia stilled. “You must know I am at your service, my dear.”

“It’s nothing that will require the use of those rubies, to be sure. I suppose I just would like your advice.”

“I would be glad to give it, but would you explain?”

Addy did, leaving nothing of her predicament out, save for her inconvenient and apparently uncontrollable reaction to Vickers. “I’m not like mother. I don’t have one burning vision for my life. In fact, I suppose the problem is that I don’t know what I want. My father left me in the care of his family, and they seem to think that their only recourse—and mine—is a marriage to be arranged as quickly as possible.”

“Yes, that’s the general consensus of those with a young girl on their hands,” Hestia said with a smile.

“I understand their points of view. Great-Aunt Delia worries about her age, that something will happen to her and I’ll be left in the hands of Cousin Rosamond, who just wants to be rid of me, really.” She sighed. “No one has considered any possibility that I can see, beyond the idea that I catch a husband in the few remaining weeks of the Season. Yet I don’t want to be rushed into anything. Surely they can look at my parents and see the folly of that. Is it so much to ask, really? I just want to find a way to make myself—and my sister—happy.”

“Very wise, my dear. You’ve also been very smart to cultivate a reputation for everything correct and proper. It can only help, but truly, the sort of situation that you speak of is rare indeed. Single women on our own, we’re a frightening lot, apparently.” Her ironic smile was as beautiful as any of her others. “I think you must talk to your family. I don’t think my interference will help.”

“You’re right, I know,” Addy sighed. “I just wanted to talk to someone about it before I broach it with them. Thank you.”

“Something that might help you is presentation of your case with calm logic and full preparation. Be armed with all the details of income and cost, all the practical aspects as well as with plans for your sister. Where did you say she is now?”

“With my mother’s sister, at Crawley, in Sussex. She was the only one with children and a nursery already set up. But she took her begrudgingly. I’m afraid Muriel will be shunted off to the servants and forgotten until she’s of an age to marry.”

“Well, to play devil’s advocate, it’s a safe home with a good family. I am acquainted with many who would simply be happy with regular meals and a warm bed.”

“Yes, I know that you are right, but an indifferent upbringing is a far cry from the love, education and encouragement that I grew up with,” countered Addy. “It’s not what Mother would have wanted for Muriel. It’s not what I want for her.”

“Good,” Hestia praised. “Say it just like that.”

Addy blinked. “To Great-Aunt Delia?”

“To her, to your future husband, to anyone who needs to know about your convictions regarding your sister.” She glanced up and over Addy’s shoulder, towards the start of the Walk. “In the meantime, why don’t I set my people to looking for a sublet of a reasonable lodging in Sussex, nearby to where she’s been sent? If they won’t let you take her, perhaps a lodging close by might go a long way toward appeasing objections. You could still be a formative part of her life. It may not be quite what you want, but it can’t hurt to be armed with facts regarding different alternatives.”

“Oh, yes, what a good idea. Thank you!” Addy felt her enthusiasm dim a little. “My chances are not good, are they?”

Hestia considered. “I’d say they are better than most. Both sides of your family have seen what happens when they push young people according to their own agendas. Perhaps they will see the wisdom in allowing you to listen to your heart.”

“I hope so.” Addy only wished her heart would start to come up with some ideas. So far it seemed stubbornly fixated on Vickers—the one man she could not have, if she was to have the rest of her hopes.

She shivered. That kiss was not going to help matters in that direction.

Hestia set down her cup. “I should have the information on leases in a matter of days.” Casually, she asked, “Shall I send it via the post?”

Addy grew shy again. “Could we—if you wouldn’t mind, as I know you are very busy—but could we meet again?”

She blinked at the tenderness in Hestia’s expression. “I was hoping we could.” She looked again over Addy’s shoulder and this time waved someone over. “I’m so glad you arranged to see me, but I admit I was surprised by your choice of messenger.”

“Vickers?” Addy strove for nonchalance. “Yes, we met quite unexpectedly—and found that we could be of use to each other.” Miraculously, she didn’t choke on that bit of understatement.

“Did you?” Hestia looked quite serious. “I am glad to hear it.

The man has precious few friends and even fewer people willing to do him a good turn.”

“Truly?”

“I’m afraid so. He is a good man, despite what you hear about him. I’m glad to find that you are treating him fairly.”

Addy took a great swallow of tea, hoping the heat of it would provide an excuse for her deepening flush. “Of course. He’s been everything kind.”

“Good. Then I will leave him in your capable hands.” She raised her tone. “And here he is. My dear Vickers, thank you for delivering Adelaide to me. We are getting on famously, so I didn’t want to keep you waiting unnecessarily. You can leave her to me, and I shall see her home.”

Hestia Wright was no one’s fool. What did she know? How had she guessed? With that glint in her eye, Addy couldn’t help but wonder if this plan was truly meant to provide them some extra time together—or to keep her from Vickers’ company.

“Is that wise?” he asked with a frown.

Hestia paused. “I applaud the two of you for taking such care with Adelaide’s reputation.”

They both flushed higher at that.

“Thankfully, I brought the carriage instead of my little cart. It’s innocuous enough and I’ll sit back and take care not to be seen.”

Addy felt the weight of his gaze on her skin. She tried valiantly not to react. She felt Hestia was watching them closely. “Thank you so much for your help today, Mr. Vickers.”

“I feel as if I am being summarily dismissed,” he complained.

“But darling,” Hestia chuckled. “We merely mean to set you free. However, we would like to use you as a go-between again, if you are amenable.” She glanced carefully between them. “We have a further bit of business to take care of,” she finished.

“Of course. You know I’d do anything you asked.”

“I know you would, my friend.”

He bowed and kissed her hand. He gave Addy a nod, which she returned. She fought back a sense of panic and a sudden sense of

loss, as just like that, he was gone.

“Now we have time to chat,” Hestia said with satisfaction.

“Tell me about your sister, won’t you?”

Chapter Six

For two days Vickers stalked restlessly through his natural territory—the shabby, fringed edges of the ton. The young bucks noted the sharpness of his temper and gave him a wide berth.

Vickers, in turn, gave Lady Mitford a wide berth, even as he watched her closely as she moved through the social whirl. He told himself he was biding his time, allowing her to relax after he'd given her an obvious alarm. He told himself he was not wild for a glimpse of Addy Stockton, that he was not nervous about seeing her again after that shattering kiss, that he was not twitchy fifty times a day, thinking about kissing her again.

Then he called himself a liar.

On the third day he cursed himself for a fool and did what he usually did when he faltered or lost focus. He fed the dragon that lived in deep in the dungeons of his soul. He went to see his mother.

“James!” She brightened for a second as he entered her private parlor. “How lovely to see you!” The smile faded, however, as she glanced fearfully at the open door behind him. “Your father is not about, is he?”

“No. I made sure of it. He has a committee meeting today that will occupy him all afternoon.”

“Good.” Still, she didn't relax. “The servants didn't see you?”

“No. Only Jeddings knows I'm here.”

Jeddings was her personal servant and the one comfort in her life. The greatest discomfort of his own was that he could not fulfill that role for her.

“Oh, that's fine then.” She smiled at last again and patted his hand.

They spoke quietly of small things. The word characterized his mother's life, as she'd long ago learned to make herself as small and invisible to her husband as possible.

“We hosted the committee chairmen for dinner a few evenings ago. Your father said I did well.”

He knew if he asked her, she wouldn't be able to name the committee. Instead he smiled broadly. "Of course you did. You've always been a wonderful hostess."

The worried, distracted look reappeared on her face. He tried to head it off. "Do you remember the time you led the children's games at the village fair? I vow, those boys and girls had never had such a grand time."

She didn't respond. Her head was cocked, listening. "You don't suppose your father will come home early, do you?" She gripped his hand.

"No. He's committed all day. I made sure." He tried again. "Do you recall the children's faces when you served them ices? They could scarce contain themselves."

"I do hope they will not release early today," she fretted. "He's promised that I can go home to Shropshire, you know. Soon."

He sighed, knowing the visit was over. "I hope he keeps that promise this time, Mother. But perhaps I should be going, just in case."

She visibly relaxed. "Perhaps it's best, dear, although you know I'm so sorry to see you go."

"I know." He promised to come again when he could, kissed her on the cheek, and left.

On the way out, he made an obscene gesture at his father's portrait. A wasted motion, but at least the fires of vengeance were stoked again.

For the first time, though, they didn't warm him. The old urgency and need were there, but the flames left him feeling bleaker and lonelier than before.

Cursing, he turned up the collar of his coat and set out for home.

For days following her clandestine visit to Vauxhall, Addy tried to go about her normal routine while uncertainties flitted about her insides like butterflies.

Waiting was not her strong suit. She'd had no word from

Hestia, nary a glimpse of Vickers. Nothing had been settled—and more than a few things had been stirred up; her past, her future . . . and that kiss. Oh, that kiss lived on, haunting her quiet moments and the long hours of the night.

She tried to distract herself and succeeded, but then she had new ideas, new plans, even some new information that might be useful—and no way to convey them.

She tried to focus instead on things she could control. She thawed her demeanor at *tonnish* events, hoping to encourage one gentleman or another. She started preparing information for the talk she was going to have with her relatives. She tried to keep herself as busy as her churning mind—which led her, one day, to a bookseller and stationer's shop, in search of paper for a project.

She had two weights of paper in hand, comparing them for sturdiness, when a girl rounded a corner too quickly and bumped her.

"Oh!" The papers slipped from her grip.

"So, sorry, Miss!" The girl, young and scrubbed clean but dressed in homespun, bent to help her. She handed the sheets over and met Addy's gaze with a significant look and a wink.

Addy stared as the girl skipped back the way she'd come, then noticed the small, folded note atop the papers in her hand.

**Newman and Co. in Pall Mall. Ask for the red gauze with
chenille embroidery**

The papers were abandoned and she was out the door in seconds. She refused to allow Henry to find a hack, but set out on foot, an absurd mixture of relief and anxiety lending speed to her stride.

The linen draper's shop was bright and airy, the merchant himself short and broad. She asked after the fabric and he smiled.

"You obviously have exquisite taste, Miss. Allow me to escort you to our private showroom." Bowing low, he led the way to a back corner and opened a door with flourish.

Vickers stood there, in the center of a tiny room shelved floor

to ceiling on every wall and stuffed to the brim with gorgeous fabrics of every description.

“Ohhhh,” she breathed. Her eyes locked with his dark, intent gaze. “Such beautiful fabrics,” she added belatedly.

Stunning, in truth, although perhaps not up to her breathless state of enthusiasm. But better admit to a fabric-induced excess of delight than the truth, for the room was small and once inside, she stood disturbingly close to Vickers.

“Thank you, Newman,” he said.

“Of course, sir. Call if you need aught.” He swung the door shut.

Leaving her alone and in intimate proximity with—Vickers’ neck cloth.

A wonderful creation, crisply creased and intricately folded, functioning as the perfect compliment to the hard edge of his jaw and the strong angle of his cheekbones.

And the only safe place for her to look, for below sat the shoulders she’d gripped when last she saw him and atop sat that lovely, determined mouth that had plundered her own.

“Come in.”

A small round table sat in the middle of the space, partially covered in designs and swatches and accompanied by two chairs. She took one, and he the other—and here they were again, close, isolated . . . nervous.

“Hestia charged me with a delivery.” He handed over a large packet.

“Thank you.” She pulled out a neat, detailed description of several rooms in London, each furnished and as inexpensive as could be had without sacrificing respectability. The distance to Crawley from both was also marked.

“Another note with a similar report on Sussex leases will come soon.”

“Thank her for me?”

He nodded. “I wanted a chance to talk to you, thus—” He waved a hand.

“However did you arrange it?” she asked, taking in all the wonderful sarcenets and silks.

His mouth quirked. “I’m the Wicked Vickers. I know every pretty nook and cranny in London.”

She grinned. “Then I look forward to seeing more of them.”

His half-smile faded. “We must speak of that.”

“Yes,” she agreed eagerly. “I’ve news! I’ve found a way to help you.”

In the same instant he said, “We must put an official end to our agreement.”

“Wait,” they both exclaimed at once. “What?”

“Hestia’s right. You must take care of your reputation. Especially if you wish to take that course,” he pointed at the packet. “After last time . . .”

“Forget last time. Please, listen? I’ve finally found a way I can be of real use to you.” Hestia’s comment about Vickers having no friends to turn to had haunted her. “Hear me out.”

He sat back with a resigned look.

“It’s true, you scared Rosamond. She doesn’t wish to talk to you.” She held up a hand at his protest. “However, she does seem inclined to talk *about* you. She’s worried, and she’s fretting out loud. She’s begun talking of her . . . friendship with your father.”

“To you?” he scowled.

“Yes, and I’m happy to tell you what you need to know, as long as we follow the parameters of our original agreement.”

He shook his head. “It’s not a good idea.”

“Really? Because she told me that a mutual acquaintance paired them together. She didn’t say whom, but the way she spoke implied that it was someone with influence. She agreed to spend time with your father, act as his hostess as he held entertainments, and to be sure certain of her friends became acquainted with certain of his.”

“She told me nearly as much already,” he said dismissively. “It’s not worth the risk.”

“Perhaps she did, but I’m convinced I can persuade her to reveal more. I have time and circumstance on my side.”

“Why? Why would you go to such trouble?”

“Because you did me such a good turn, and you didn’t even realize it.” She fiddled with a swatch. “I told you how important my stories are to me? Well, they were lost to me for a good while. Grief killed the words and scenes and people of my inner world. Eventually time passed and we all began to live again, but I couldn’t find them. Then I met you—and you looked right at me. You made it easy to be my old self again—and it all started to come back.” She felt tears welling and hated to show such weakness, but willed him to see how serious she felt about this. “It started with that poor young girl, then with you . . . and now they are all back! My head is full again. I wrote a new piece for my father—we just got word that he is delayed in Spain—he’ll be thrilled to know that I’m not so alone anymore.”

“I’m happy for you.” His tone, as gentle as she’d ever heard from him, sent a shiver along her spine and right into her core.

“I’d like to return the favor. I’d like to be your friend.”

“But the risk—”

“To my reputation? We’ve done well enough so far.” She waved her hand. at their seclusion.

“Yes, but I trust Newman completely. We’re safe today, but can’t come back here too often.”

“You just said you knew all the good spots.”

“There’s more. It’s not just your reputation to consider, but mine as well.”

That gave her pause. “Yours?”

“Yes. What if we’re caught? What if we were somehow compromised? I like you well enough, Miss Stockton, but you are The Celestial—the most proper debutante on the marriage market. I can’t marry someone like you. It would play right into my father’s hands.”

She ignored the stab of pain his words wrought. “I don’t think I understand.”

“I told you that scandal is my greatest weapon, yes? He abhors it. He hates when I drag the family name through the muck. He also, deep down, harbors the hope that I’ll one day repent, that I’ll recall what I owe my family and step back in line.”

“Not surprising, I suppose.”

“Which means I can never take a respectable Society girl to wife. If I do, he wins a major battle, and I lose a potentially powerful weapon against him. I’ve never made the threat, but I don’t have to. I keep the idea in reserve, and in the meantime, just the thought that I’d choose the wrong sort of wife keeps him up at night.”

“Yes, but how do you think to end the stalemate?” Those wonderful brows broadcast her skepticism. “Wait until you are in need of a scandal and marry a . . . a . . . *lightskirt*?”

“In all likelihood. I’d considered marrying one of *his*, but that didn’t turn out,” he said. “I even briefly considered Lady Mitford, but the time isn’t right and truthfully, I need to save the threat for when I really need it.”

He was entirely serious.

Shock stole her words, but only for a moment. “You’d go that far?”

“I’ll go to any lengths,” he answered quietly.

She stared. “Then you truly do need a friend.”

He rose from his chair and turned away. She didn’t think he was contemplating the lutestring.

“There’s one other consideration.” Spinning, he speared her with a glance. “What’s between us is not friendship.”

She searched for a denial, but all this talk of battles and compromise and marriage unsettled her even further.

“You know what I mean,” he said, low.

She stood, too, determined to be as resolute as he. “I know.” What he meant was currently buzzing along her every nerve, making her brave and hot and reckless. “That kiss is in the air between us, stirring up uncertainties. *How does he feel? What is she thinking? Will we do it again?*” She advanced on him.

He retreated. He didn’t get far before his back came up against a shelf full of *peau do soie*. She stopped before him, her heart racing.

“I know the perfect antidote to that. Do you?”

“No.” It came out strangled. By that gorgeous neckcloth, perhaps.

“We’ll tell each other how we feel, what we are thinking. We retain control. We act like adults. I can do that, for the sake of a friend. Can you?”

He didn’t answer. “You forgot one,” he said instead.

“*Will we do it again?* That one?”

“That’s the one.” His gaze had fixed on her mouth.

Well, then he was going to go cross-eyed. She leaned in, touched her fingers to his hard-edged jaw, closed her own eyes—and kissed him.

Softly at first. Then just a bit harder. Silently, she asked for more, because she was willing enough, but unsure how to take it.

He showed her. His lips danced sweetly, but then his tongue captured hers. They consumed each other for a long while as the world slipped sideways, then faded away. Nothing existed beyond that kiss. There was only raging heat and mutual desire and a great, yawning emptiness below.

She struggled to pull back, to resurface before she asked—begged—him to fill it.

Though her chest heaved as if she’d run a mile, she stepped back and lifted her chin. “There. No question now, is there? We did it again. It’s done. Now we know and there’s no need to wonder or to do it again.”

He looked like she felt—like the howling wind was still blowing inside, screaming for satisfaction.

“Is there?” she demanded.

He cleared his throat. “No. No need. Now we know.”

“And we can continue, acting as adults, helping each other?”

He paused, considering. Or gathering his shaken senses, as she did. Mrs. Siddons be damned. Addy was giving the performance of a lifetime.

“For now.”

She sighed. “Good. Now let’s settle the logistics. We’ll need to be able to reach each other . . .” She sat, hid her shaking fingers and presented a picture of calm rationality. Really, if there was any justice in the world, someone would be here to witness this and give

her a silent, standing ovation.

Chapter Seven

James Vickers, heir to the Viscount Vickers, libertine, high-stakes gambler, all-around cad and particular pain in his father's posterior, had done some stupid and dangerous things in his time. This must top them all.

Why? Not because of an irate husband, cheating black leg or brute of a moneylender. Oh, no. Because of a slip of a lovely, inviting, dangerous girl.

He should end this ridiculous arrangement. But the lure of information to use against his father tempted him strongly—and that was as nothing compared to the appeal of the girl herself.

Which left him suspended in the midst of this conundrum.

At first they kept to their usual routines. But he began to check in with her nightly during her social events. He'd wait for a private moment, sidle up and ask her to dance. Each time she would come up with a more outrageous reason to turn him down. Each time he would suffer that sharp pang, they would share a laugh, he would occasionally advise her on the gentlemen attending, and then move on.

But he did arrange for a communication system. Hestia had a small network of street children who kept ears to the ground for her, and ran the occasional errand in exchange for food, a bed, shelter and someone who cared. Vickers commandeered the lot of them and arranged a schedule in which one of them should be conveniently near Addy Stockton's house at all times.

And in fact, she was the first one to call a meeting.

It was mid-morning and he was just leaving his rooms when young Francis Headly dashed up to him on the street.

"Yer gentry mort wants words wit' ye," she announced.

"Good morning, Flightly." He grinned. "I thought Hestia was working with you on your speech."

Her tone and demeanor changed in a flash. "Indeed, she is, sir. Unfortunately the streets make a poor venue in which to exercise such

skills.”

He chuckled. “Very nice. I shall give you a good report.” Taking out a card, he scribbled on it.

One hour. Hyde Park. Chesterfield Gate. Follow the boy with a red hoop.

He handed her the card and a coin. “Send Jed to me right away, will you? And deliver this back to the lady.”

“Aye, aye!” With an impudent salute, she was off, and he went back inside to make plans.

A little over an hour later, he perched upon a low branch in a small clearing in the midst of a good-sized cluster of trees in Hyde Park. Just minutes later, rustling heralded her arrival. Stick in hand and hoop over his shoulder, Jed held a branch high so that Addy might pass through, then he dropped it and disappeared from where they’d come.

Vickers stood. She looked beautiful in sprigged muslin and a light blue spencer. Her eyes widened when she spotted him and an impish grin lifted that alluring mouth. “Worry for our reputations, indeed! You’ve brought me to an assignation in the Park!”

“I hear they are all the rage. Wasn’t there gossip just yesterday about Brodham sneaking off with an American chit?” He sobered. “Did anyone see you?”

“No, no. There were some children and nannies at the gate, but I saw no one once we took the footpath heading north. Is the reservoir near?”

“Just beyond.”

“It is lovely.” She glanced around at the mix of sun and shade and at the bees flirting with clover and a few straggling wildflowers at the edges. “What is this place?”

“Actually, it’s a trysting spot well-known amongst a select group of high-flyers. Safe enough in the daytime, but don’t come near at night unless you are prepared for a shock.”

She shook her head. “I won’t. But I am glad you could make

arrangements so quickly.”

“Sit down?” He waved to his former seat.

“I will, although I’m imagining some of the creative uses this branch has been put to.”

He laughed, feeling uncommonly light. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been in such a good mood. “Before you deliver your news, a bit of advice. I noticed you danced twice with Nowell last night. Don’t pin your hopes there, he’s not ready for a leg shackle.” He froze. “Damn! If I’d had a head on my shoulders, I should have brought a musician along. You could scarcely deny me a dance here, Miss Stockton.”

“Of course I could,” she said irritably. “And you might as well call me Addy, as you’ve kissed me twice and we are now trysting in the Park.”

Lascivious images rose up in his head. His fingers twitched.

“And another thing, why does your advice always address the men I shouldn’t bother with? Can’t you think of a single gentleman who might actually consider me as a marriage prospect?”

Hell, no, his gut responded instantly. Not a man in the *ton* or out of it deserved her.

Including him.

“I’ll try,” he muttered. His good mood began to wane.

“Thank you. Now, I must tell you what Rosamond divulged. She got quite tipsy at a soiree last evening and quite talkative in the carriage home. We rode past Compton Street and she pointed out a house—one that she says secretly belongs to your father!”

Every last vestige of good humor vanished. “I know it.”

“That’s where she acted as his hostess and coordinated their social maneuvering. Rosamond wouldn’t give particulars, but she hinted that he and his cronies get up to some highly questionable activities there.”

“Didn’t you hear me? I said I know the house.” His knee began to jig up and down until he set the branch to bouncing. He stood. “I know all the vile tricks they get up to there.” He’d seen the orgies of violence and sex, heard the plotting against both their enemies and

their peers. He rounded to face her. “You must make sure that Rosamond *never* reveals that she was there. If anyone finds out, all her newfound acceptance with the *ton* will be ruined forever.”

Eyes wide, she nodded. “You . . . knew?” She thought a moment. “But of course, I suppose you would.” She frowned. “I hope your mother remains ignorant of it.”

“She does,” he answered harshly. “Or I should say, she does now. She might once have known, but if she did, she recalls it no longer.”

She was standing too, now, he noted. She reached out to clutch the tree. He could see it in her eyes, the same curiosity that he’d witnessed so many times before. She wanted to ask. They all did. Everyone was eaten with curiosity. What had the Viscount done, to make his son hate him so? What was his sin?

Only one person had never asked. Hestia. He knew why. She’d lived some version of his hell herself, and didn’t need details.

But Miss Stockton—Addy—wouldn’t know. She was a child conceived in love and raised with care. Even her imagination couldn’t conjure such a monster as his father.

He tried to summon his anger, his disdain, the blunt, rude words he used to push away everyone who gave in to vulgar, idle curiosity. They wouldn’t come. He couldn’t hurl his usual retorts at her.

He waited.

She licked her lips. He flinched before she ever made a sound, waiting for the arrow to arrive.

“I’m sorry.”

He hadn’t realized he’d closed his eyes. They opened now so that he could stare at her.

Dangerous.

Not because she was the beautiful, curved, perfect representation of an angel mixed with an imp. But because she returned the favor that had meant so much to her. She looked past his facade and saw the hurt, the vulnerability.

And she didn’t ask.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

He abruptly stepped near. He grabbed her shoulders and kissed her hard. Fierce. Possessive. Grateful. He tried to convey it all.

“So am I,” he told her.

He spun on his heel and walked away.

Chapter Eight

Addy wanted to dance with Vickers. Damn him for asking so consistently—he'd turned the idea into forbidden fruit. Surely that was why she endlessly fantasized about it, about his hand on her waist, her skirts twisting about his legs and the two of them breathing the same air.

Her problem was no longer that she didn't know what she wanted, but that she increasingly wanted what she couldn't have. A dance, a touch, a kiss, a story. *The* story—of everything that had left him so prickly and alluring and maddening and irresistible.

She wanted Vickers.

The futility of it soured her mood. She told Rosamond that she was wrapped up in a project and needed a reprieve from the social whirl. Surprisingly, her cousin didn't object. It seemed she was undergoing her own difficulties.

She wandered in, one afternoon, to peer over Addy's shoulder.

"So many? You have been busy."

"Yes." Addy regarded her work with satisfaction. "I included all of Muriel's favorites and a few new ones."

Rosamond nodded, but didn't move. For quite a while.

Addy turned. "Did you need something?"

"Oh? Yes. I wanted to speak with you."

"Will you sit down?" Addy turned her chair away from her desk and smiled at her distracted cousin. "What is it?"

Rosamond fiddled with her sash. "There's been talk. People have noticed that you've struck up an acquaintance with James Vickers."

Addy stilled. "What is it that's been said?"

"Only that he watches you. He speaks to you at every function."

Addy shrugged, hiding her vast relief. "We never speak long. We haven't even shared a dance."

"Yes, I suspect that's what keeps the gossips merely curious and

not bloodthirsty. It's just . . . I remembered that argument we had over him at the beginning of the Season. I wanted to warn you to be careful." Her face fell. "I don't wish for you to make the same mistakes I have."

Addy spoke gently. "What's wrong, Rosamond?"

Tears welled in her cousin's eyes. "I've been a fool. I never thought I'd be welcomed back into Society so warmly, nor that I'd enjoy it so."

"Or that you'd meet someone like Sir Harold?" Addy nudged.

Rosamond gave a tearful laugh. "Who would have thought it? I know he's no Adonis, but he's quite funny and so *nice* to me! I'm not used to it."

"I imagine it would be easy to get used to."

"Yes, if I'd not acted such an idiot. Don't you see? After Mitford died I may have acted a little *fast*, but it wasn't until I mixed myself up with Viscount Vickers that I made a serious mistake. I'm afraid, Addy! Afraid to enjoy this new life when a word from him could snatch it away." She pounded the arm of her chair in frustration. "And for what? So he could hear the gossip from Princess Charlotte's household? And what could a contact amongst the Queen's ladies do for a man like him? It all seems so pointless—yet it could ruin me!"

Addy was aghast. "Pointless, but dangerous, Rosamond! You know how touchy the Regent is about such matters. You must never tell anyone that you took part in such scheming!"

"No, of course not. I'm sorry to frighten you." Rosamond sighed. "I'm just so frustrated."

"Of course you are."

Her cousin stood. "I think I'll take a walk to clear my head." She gripped Addy's shoulder. "Just be careful, dear. It's so easy to make a mistake."

"I will. Thank you, Rosamond."

She began to pace once she was alone. She must tell Vickers. Rosamond's misery had her hesitating, though. Yet this could be important for him to know—and he had promised to keep Rosamond's

name clear.

Resolute, she went to the front parlor, but didn't see anyone within sight of the house. A sudden thought sent her to the back. Yes. There, perched on the top of the garden fence, sat the girl, Francis, petting a disreputable-looking cat. She hopped down when she spied Addy and ran up to hand her a note.

The Swan. Confectioners on Jermyn Street.

"Ask for Madame's special," Francis advised. "It's delicious."

"I will." Addy grinned at the girl. "And I'll bring you one, too, shall I?"

The chit swept her a creditable curtsy. "Thank you, ever so much."

She smiled as she returned inside to fetch her bonnet and call for the carriage.

The Swan was a charming shop, its glass case filled with delightful-looking temptations and its few small tables empty at this hour. Once more Addy was escorted to a private room, this one with a good-sized desk at the center. Vickers sat there, waiting, along with a teacart laden with colorful creations.

Addy rolled her eyes. "After this, I'm going to be shocked every time I enter a small room and do not find you there."

He grinned. "How many small rooms do you normally frequent?"

"I don't know . . . cloak rooms, dressing rooms, antechambers."

"And you'll be expecting me in all those places?"

"Regrettably."

"I like the idea." He gestured for her take a seat. "In any case, I did say I knew all the good spots."

"So you did." She sat, unsure in a way she'd never yet felt with him.

“Hestia sent this.” He slid another packet across the desk. She took it, but didn’t open it. The idea of living alone had begun to lose its appeal.

“Would you care for a pastry?”

She summoned a smile. “Francis says I must try Madame’s special.”

“The girl has good taste.” He served her, selecting a beautiful, cream filled baked masterpiece shaped like a swan.

She toyed with it. “Would you mind . . . would you tell Hestia that I’d like to meet with her?”

He paled. “Of course. If I’ve offended you—”

“No!” She stopped him. “It’s just that she has a unique perspective.” She pulled out the package she’d brought. “Also, would you deliver this? It’s just a book of children’s stories. I put it together for Muriel and made a copy, as I thought there might sometimes be children at Half Moon House.”

“Indeed there are.” He took it up. “How wonderful.”

“The illustrations are simple. It’s not my strength.”

“They’re perfect.” He laughed. “No surprise there.”

“I’m to visit Muriel tomorrow, so you might wish to let your lookouts free for a day. I’ll leave early, spend midday in Crawley and return tomorrow night.”

“I hope you find your sister well.”

“Thank you.” She shifted in her seat. Curse him for his elegant good looks and constant masculine pull. Tension hung between them, as always, stealing her focus and her breath, but she felt a certain responsibility to resist it. He’d walked away, setting unspoken boundaries. She would respect them.

“I’ve news.” She paused. “Though perhaps it will again turn out to be something you already know.”

“What is it?”

She explained Rosamond’s predicament and her outburst about the Princess and the Queen’s ladies. It didn’t sound so urgent now. Frowning, she chased bits of pastry swan about her plate.

“Miss Sto—” He stopped. “Addy.”

Struck by some resounding note in his voice, she looked up.

His expression remained grim, but his gaze lit with purpose and resolution. "This might be it—what I need."

"Truly?"

"Yes. Think. It should be easy enough to find which of the Queen's women joined the court during the time of Lady Mitford's association with my father. If he was so eager to help someone gain the position, then you can be sure he wanted something in return. If I find her, I can question her."

Grim promise radiated from him.

Addy straightened. "I'm so glad I could really help."

Suddenly he reached across the desk and took her hand.

"Thank you. For today—but also for everything else."

Excitement rippled through her. The hairs on her neck stood straight, then sent the signal everywhere else. She shivered. The desk lamp cast a glowing light on his dark hair, making it shine. His eyes narrowed, the better to see into her vulnerable soul.

"From the first you've run me ragged. I'd forgotten what it felt like." He stood, keeping his grip on her hand and coming around to her seat. Gently, he tugged her to her feet. "You made me laugh and shake my head—but you also made me feel better."

With heat and words and touch he crafted a slippery slope, easy to fall into and undoubtedly enjoyable to experience. Still, she fought valiantly to stay upright. "About what?"

"About everything. The world." A shadow moved behind his eyes. "Even about myself."

She should fight. Resist. Do the smart thing and head home.

But then he fought dirty.

He touched her brow and smiled. "Not perfect, but wonderful." Slowly, he leaned in to kiss her.

Her feet slid right out from under her. She went whooshing into something that felt frighteningly like love.

She kissed him back, setting loose all of her hopes and fears and longings. She arched against him and reveled in his moan of pleasure.

His hand slid downward, paused in the small of her back, then dipped down to press her bottom against him. She burrowed into the circle he made, muscle and linen and superfine. "Yes," she said as he pulled away and nuzzled the nape of her neck.

"God," he said into her shoulder. "God damn it."

She stilled.

His chest heaved. He stepped back.

"You are pulling me in too many directions," she panted, desperate to have him back.

"We have to stop."

"Do we?" she whispered.

"We do," he groaned. "There's no damned future in it."

Rage blossomed, fueled by hordes of disappointed desires. She spun on her heel and headed for the door.

"Wait!"

"For what? More temptation? More heartbreak?" She stumbled over the words.

"It's my fault, I know."

"Then *do* something."

"I can't! My course is set. I can't let up. He must always know I'm there, opposing his every move."

"For how long?" she despaired.

"Forever," he said flatly. "I'm sorry."

Tears started, which merely made her angrier. She fled before she turned into a furious, sobbing mess.

He caught her at the shop's doorway.

His hand lay soft on her shoulder before it tracked down to lift hers to his mouth. His eyes were as bleak as she'd ever seen them.

"Come back."

"It's no use," she protested.

"I'm going to explain." His mouth barely moved, saying the words. "I've never told a soul, but you deserve to know."

It wasn't enough. She wanted to throw it back at him, but she was afraid he would shatter, so brittle did he look. Silently, she followed him back.

He sat her at the desk and turned away. When he spoke, his words were directed at a supply cabinet in the corner.

“My father was a harsh and demanding taskmaster. He expected much of me, growing up. I was to be a good scholar and better sportsman, to study art and horsemanship and the business of running the estates. I would handle it all in exemplary fashion, as my ancestors had. I was a gentleman, a man of honor. My duty was to my family name.”

He looked over his shoulder. “I worked hard to meet his expectations, his exacting example. I believed in my destiny, was proud to be his son and heir.”

“What happened?”

“I turned eighteen. Mother was feeling poorly that week. She’d been in a carriage accident and was slow to recover. Father teased her that she was ready to be put to pasture.” He shifted. “He didn’t show the same dark humor to the coachman, however. He sacked the man for shoddy driving, although the poor old soul swore up and down that he’d checked the suspension, that there’d been an unexplainable problem with the brace and spring. Mother was tired and sore and all the servants were in a mood, but she managed to arrange a small birthday dinner. Father insisted we go out afterwards, though. Together.” He sighed. “He took me to the house on Compton.”

She stifled her urge to go to him.

“They were there, his friends and . . . others. A party. But it was sickening, not a celebration. No honor, only greed and fear and violence. I was sent off with a woman.” He shook his head as if to block the memory. “I’d never seen such rote, mechanical movement, such dead eyes. She expected abuse, had resigned herself to it, readied herself for it.” He swallowed. “I left. Found a billiards room and a bottle of brandy. Everything I knew about my father was a lie. I sat in the corner and drank while a group of men played. Eventually I realized what they were discussing.

“‘Foxglove does it quick, one said. ‘Rat poison if you want it slow, a little every day.’”

“Another spoke up. ‘But to be safest, go for the carriage. A wiggle at the junction with the spring and the brace—’

“His friend stopped him, nodding toward me. They went back to their game.”

“Oh, no,” Addy said.

“Yes. I knew, then. He’d done it. Tried to kill my mother. Why? Her money, perhaps. A mistress who wanted to be a viscountess? I don’t even recall what happened next, I only remember pulling him away from a terrified woman—and hitting him. Again and again, until they pulled me off him.”

She waiting, knowing it wasn’t the end.

“For two days I didn’t go home. Until I heard the news. My friends tracked me down, told me my mother was injured. Unconscious. There had been a row, the servants said, and she’d fallen down the stairs.”

Addy gasped.

“She slept for three days and I never left her side. He stayed away until she woke up. She was confused. She still is, really. She’s never been the same. She doesn’t remember him standing over her, threatening her life unless I stopped overreacting and did as I was told. She doesn’t remember my threats, either. She was to be kept out of it, kept safe and protected or I would expose him for the liar—and murderer—that I now knew him to be.” He sighed. “We’ve been at war ever since.”

Addy stood. She touched him gently, but he flinched—and somehow that summed up their entire quandary.

“And the worst part is,” she whispered, “that neither of you will ever win.”

Chapter Nine

“DeeDee! Look!”

“I see, darling.” Addy pressed a swift kiss to her sister’s head.
“It’s a lovely pinecone.”

Content at the praise, Muriel wandered over to show her treasure to Mary, her cousin.

“MeeMee! Look!”

“A big one!” the eight year old said. “Now, put it with the others.”

Muriel laughed. She was methodically moving a pile of rocks, pinecones and acorn caps from one blanket to another.

Addy smiled, blinking back tears again. She’d been crying on and off since she’d left Vickers yesterday, but these were happy tears. Muriel remembered her. Her baby face had lit like the sun when she’d caught sight of her. Addy had snatched her up and hugged her close and had a good cry, not caring who saw her.

Which turned out to be nearly the whole household, in fact. They’d lined the steps in a formal welcome. Even her mother’s sister had been noticeably warmer. “I’m sorry I was so curt when last we met,” she said, shamefaced. “I just think your father is making a terrible mistake, running away from you girls. But Muriel is a delight and we are glad to have her. And I hear you are one of the belles of the beau monde.”

Addy had demurred, then gratefully agreed to a tour of the large, comfortable nursery. She’d been presented to all the toys and invited to a picnic in the gardens.

Muriel was happy. Healthy. She clearly loved the other children. Mary, at just the right age, acted as a little mother to her. Even her aunt was clearly not as removed as she’d thought.

Addy was relieved, but also a little gut-wrenched. She’d thought moving the two of them to their own household would be a better situation, but now she was not so sure.

About anything, as it happened, and she had another good cry

in the carriage on the way home. Nothing had truly gone awry—except everything. Nothing was as she'd thought, planned or hoped. Muriel. Rosamond. Vickers. Her heart was breaking over his revelations and the misery that haunted him. She couldn't pretend any longer that she didn't want him. She did, fiercely. She'd give up her stories again to help him, gain a future with him. He wanted her too, but his damned, endless vendetta left them hopeless, and she couldn't really fault him for it.

So she dissolved into another spate of tears.

But as the carriage neared home, she struggled for control. She tried to repair herself before she crossed the threshold—only to find that she needn't bother.

The house was in an uproar. Servants huddled outside the parlor, where she found Great-Aunt Delia stamping her cane and demanding explanations. Rosamond wailed, paced and wrung her hands.

"Oh, Addy," she cried, once she'd spotted her. "It's happened! The worst!"

"What? What is it?"

"Lord Vickers was here—in a state!" Delia said. "I heard him shouting at my girl from my room!"

"He's in a fit," Rosamond moaned. "He accused me of telling his secrets. And the threats!" she wailed.

Feeling like her heart was going to beat out of her chest, Addy reached for calm. "Steady, please. Think! He cannot say a thing against you without exposing himself."

"You're wrong! He brought them with him—papers, signed and witnessed. Accounts against me, naming me as a conspirator, accusing me of proposing his schemes and trying to seduce him and his friends into taking part. The liar! The cheat! I didn't have a thing to do with kidnapping that girl—when they started plotting that was when I pulled away!"

"Kidnapping!" Addy reared back. "What are you talking about, Rosamond?"

"This Spring—the Grand Duchesses' Russian servant girl that

went missing. I heard them making plans. I had nothing to do with it, I swear! But he says if the questions continue, he'll see me taken up to Newgate and held for trial!"

"No, he won't," Addy replied forcefully.

"He's right," Rosamond moaned. "There's nothing we can do to stop him."

"He's wrong." Addy pulled away, heading for her room.

"What are you doing?" her cousin called.

"I'm writing letters—and then I'm taking steps."

She sent the letters off, then stood in the hall for a moment, fists clenching and unclenching. A thought struck her and her head went up, just before she headed for the front door. Outside she paced along the pavement, then went to stand in the wide street, turning and searching.

"Looking for sumptin'?"

Addy breathed a sigh of relief as the slight shadow slid from the servant's stairway. "I thought you had a day free, Francis?"

"I stopped by to be sure you made it back. Looked like a storm busting loose in there, so I waited."

"Bless you." She bent down. "Here's what I have in mind."

The girl's eyes grew large as she listened. "He ain't gonna like none o' that."

Addy straightened. "He'll get over it."

Vickers dragged himself up the stairs to his rooms, his heart feeling heavier than his feet.

The day had begun with such promise. A few simple questions and he'd found that two new ladies had joined the Queen's women at the start of the year. Interestingly, neither were still at Court. A little investigation revealed Lady Hargraft had only just left for her lying in. But Lady Pilgren had requested leave to return to the country to care for her ailing husband.

The timing of that request interested Vickers, as it came exactly

at the same time, weeks earlier, that Hestia Wright's oldest enemy, Lord Marstoke, was found to be scheming against the crown. Marstoke had disappeared, Lady Pilgren had fled home and Rosamond had broken ties with his father, all near the same time.

It required further investigation, but now he needed a good night's sleep. He was so tired that he just might drift off without tossing, turning and fixating on Addy Stockton.

He opened his door—and hoped like hell he was tired enough for hallucinations.

“I thought you'd never get here.”

Real, then. All for the best, as he hoped, if he was going to dream Addy into his rooms, he'd have the sense to drape her in sheer linen and lace rather than ratty linsey-woolsey and a frantic look in her eye.

He looked at the key in his hand, at the door, then at her.

“Francis.”

Sighing, he tossed the key onto a shelf. “Something has to be done about that girl.”

He thanked the powers-that-be when Addy rose out of his favorite lounging chair. Some very creative images had begun to come to life in his head.

“There's trouble.”

“I gathered.”

“We can't delay. Something must be done.”

He perched on the arm of the chair. “What is it?” He didn't want another crisis. He wanted to strip her of that cloak and lay his head on her cozy, cushioned bosom.

She related her story, although she grew unhappier in the telling. Vickers, however, began to straighten. His weariness dropped away, chased by excitement.

“He must have heard I was asking questions. It spooked him.”

“Yes, and he did worse to Rosamond.”

“I'm sorry.” His heart was beating fast. He felt strange, almost sick. Light-headed. “Don't you see? This is it.”

“What?” She frowned.

“All this time I’ve waited for him to make a mistake, and now he’s done it.” He could see she didn’t understand. He took her hands and grinned. “Addy, you darling! To think, it’s Marstoke.” He shook his head. “I was just beginning to wonder if he might perhaps have been fool enough to get mixed up with Marstoke—and this proves it. We can link him with a traitor.”

His heart felt light. Almost. He was nearly free of the dark shackles that had tied him to his father for so long. “We have him, Addy!”

She still looked confused. “Not yet, we don’t.”

“That kidnapping caused all sorts of problems with the Grand Duchess and the other foreign dignitaries. Hestia has friends in the government who are very interested in whatever information they can get on it—and on Marstoke.”

“But will they believe us if we tell them? It’s just second hand information.”

“Lady Mitford can tell them.” He let her go and walked in a circle, running his hands through his hair. “She heard it directly from the source.”

Her extended silence had him turning to face her. When she spoke, her tone was as icy as her eyes were reputed to look. “No, she won’t.”

His hands dropped. “Why not?”

“Because our original agreement still stands.”

“What are you talking about? Addy, don’t you see? This is the last shot. It’s finally over.”

Her face crumpled. “I’m sorry, James, but it’s not. You *promised*. When we started this, you promised to keep Rosamond’s name out of trouble.”

Wild anger and denial began to build. “This is different.”

“It’s not. It will be your father and his documents and his friends versus her word. They might believe him! They might take her up! Even if they did listen, her name would still be ruined. She’s already got blots in her copybook. She can’t survive a brush with treason. This will be the end of her.”

The whirlwind was rising inside. “She can give her testimony in secret. Surely they’ll agree to keep her name confidential.”

“It won’t happen, but even if it did, her name would leak out. Everything does. Look at the secret testimony against Princess Caroline. It ended up splashed all through the papers.”

Swiftly, savagely, he knocked over a stack of books, then toppled the table they’d stood on. “Are you asking me not to use the evidence that marks my father as a traitor? That will finally set me and my mother free?”

She stood quietly. “No. I’m not asking. I don’t have to.”

Fists clenched, chest blowing, he stared at her.

She approached. Her eyes shone sad, but her face was strangely proud as she cupped her fingers along his jaw.

He wanted to lean into her touch. He wanted to slap her hand away. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“Because no matter what your father is—you are a man of honor.”

He did turn away, snarling.

“You are.” Her voice sounded soft as velvet, but it cut like steel. “I see you, James, the same way that you see me. I know you are a fine and honorable man, no matter what mask you show others. I know, even to help your mother, you won’t harm Rosamond.”

He almost hated her. “Go,” he said after a moment. “Leave.”

She didn’t answer. For a long moment there was no sound at all, then her footstep sounded behind him just as she pressed herself all along his back.

She hugged him tight. He stood, blank, empty, not moving.

“I’ll help,” she said. “We’ll find another way to use this information. Someone, somewhere knows something. We just have to look.”

She pressed closer. Her hands began to move, to explore the expanse of his chest. Behind him, she began to press small kisses against his coat. He turned. “What are you doing?”

“This.” She pressed her mouth to his. Her lips moved, featherlight. The kiss was slow, confident, coaxing.

He stood silent, unmoving.

Eventually, she drew back.

“Did you think to make a trade?” he asked harshly. “Your honor for mine?”

She recoiled. “You know I didn’t.”

He held his silence.

So did she.

“Years,” he spat. “Years of misery and pain. Through it all, I waited for this moment and you are stealing it.”

“Delaying it, only.”

“So confident,” he sneered. She’d broken something inside him. All the stirring and confusion he’d felt since the day she’d addressed him in the park flipped on it’s end, turning from new and anticipatory to dark and defensive. “You know me? You don’t know as much as you think you do.”

She looked hurt, but still resolute.

“But of course, how could I think so of The Celestial, the perfect girl who never makes a wrong step.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You know that’s not me. You deserve that appellation more than I do.”

He laughed. “Now that’s ridiculous. I’m not perfect. I’m the Wicked Vickers. You know what I am? I’m *tired*. Broken. Lonely. You saw the real me? Well, you never showed it.”

She frowned her confusion.

“You never danced with me. You turned me away every single time I asked.” He shifted his gaze away from her. “That was a step wrong.”

“But . . . your personae. Your image . . .”

“No! It’s time for truth, now, not stories. It was never about my image, but yours. Did you never think that you might have used that perfect image *for* me?”

“What?”

“If The Celestial found something worthy in the Wicked Vickers, then perhaps others might have stopped to think. Reconsidered the old, tired view of me. If they began to look

favorably on me, then they might have begun to examine their views on my father, as well. But we'll never know, will we?"

"I never—"

"No. You never. You never danced with me. It was always *your* image. Your hopes, goals, and family. Just like now." He stepped away from her. "Please, go."

"But we have to find—"

"I'll do it myself. Just as I always have done."

Chapter Ten

Addy had hurried several blocks before she noticed the carriage keeping pace behind her in the dark street. She dried her eyes, pulled her hood close and rushed on.

“Oh, do come inside,” called a familiar voice. “If I were a villain, you’d be dead twice over.”

“Hestia! How did you—Oh, Francis.”

“Yes. I’m going to have to take that girl in hand.”

She allowed the coachman to assist her in, and collapsed on the bench. “Oh, Hestia!”

The older woman reached over and tugged Addy until she switched seats and they shared a bench. Sympathy bathed her as Hestia gently stroked her hand. “Dreadful, was it?”

“You cannot know.” Addy found she was past tears. A knot of guilt and grief and anger had blocked them off.

“You’d be surprised,” Hestia sighed. “What will you do?”

She choked the words out. “There’s nothing to be done.”

Hestia pursed her lips. “Do you care for him?”

“Yes!”

I mean truly care for him, Adelaide. Not with the silly, breathless passion of a schoolgirl, but with a woman’s eye for his weaknesses and needs as well as his fine shoulders and smoldering dark eyes.”

“Yes.”

“Then there is something that can be done. You just haven’t looked hard enough.”

Addy stared. She’d shriveled to a wasteland of hopeless, helpless heartbreak and Hestia meant to speak in riddles?

After a moment the beautiful woman decided to take pity on her. “You just asked him to give up something precious to him, did you not?”

A tear wormed its way past the blockage. She nodded.

“What will you give up?” Hestia asked simply.

Addy thought about it. For a while, the carriage rocked and the silence stretched out. “Where are we going?” she suddenly asked.

“We’re taking you home. The long way. It seems you need the time.”

“Why?” she snapped. “So I can spin around and around in a hopeless circle?”

“So you can *think*, darling. Poor Vickers is lovely, but he’s just a man. The chances are high that he’s unable to tell you exactly what he needs, but if you two are truly close, then I’ll wager he’s shown you a sign or two. Now it’s your turn. Can you show him that you’ve been paying attention?”

“You don’t understand,” Addy cried. “It’s too complicated. Even before tonight’s fiasco, it was hopeless. He won’t consider a respectable girl and I cannot . . .” She stopped, her eyes gone wide.

“There it is,” Hestia said comfortably.

“But if I . . . If he . . .” Fear, hope and her pounding heart blasted the cold knot. “What if he will not go along with it?”

“This is real life, Adelaide, and if I’m not mistaken, real love. Neither ever comes with a guarantee.”

“My mother had one,” she said bitterly.

“She had no such thing. She was plagued with just as many uncertainties. Your father might have been appalled at her behavior. Her father might have packed her off to the Continent or a convent.” She narrowed her eyes. “What your mother had was *courage*. Are you her daughter or are you not?”

Addy scowled. “Yes!”

Hestia sat back. “Good.”

The plan flashed in her head, fully complete, like one of her stories. “I know what I need to do.”

“I thought you might.”

Weariness settled in his core and dragged at his soul. Vickers entered Half Moon House through the back passage and detoured into

the kitchen.

“Good afternoon, Peggy,” he said, snatching up a roll from a basket on the wide plank table.

“Afternoon.”

He bit into the bread and then paused to make a face back at the girl.

“I know, sir. We’re all missing Callie. Hope she’ll be back soon.”

He tossed the bun back to her. “I do too, for your sake.” Nodding his head toward the main section of the house, he asked, “Is she in her office?”

“No. Front parlor. And you’d best hurry, she’s been waitin’ on you.”

Vickers couldn’t find the energy to hurry. Though his confrontation with Addy had left him twisted and jagged inside, he’d still gone out for the rest of the night—and most of today. He’d burned up his grief and fury dogging the footsteps of a couple of his father’s cronies, waiting and watching. Sooner or later, one of them would make a mistake—and he would be there.

He’d come home just wanting to sleep for a day or three, and had not been thrilled to find the summons from Hestia. But he’d turned around and headed out, largely because he wanted to know everything she knew about the abduction of that Russian girl.

But that wasn’t the girl on his mind as he made his way through the house. He sighed. Addy. He’d been too rough on her, too quick to lay blame when she was trying to protect her family the same way he was his. He’d stopped at her aunt’s house, but had been turned away.

He paused on the threshold of Hestia’s front parlor. She sat near the windows, reading a letter. When she looked up, he nodded, then entered to throw himself in the matching seat. He scrubbed his hands over his face and looked over at her.

“Do you know where she is? I called, but the servants said she wasn’t at home. They were acting strangely, though.”

Hestia leaned forward. “Why? What do you want to say to

her?”

He didn't answer for a while. Then he sat forward and put his head in his hands. "I want to tell her what you told me, when first we met. Do you remember? You taught me how to fight him without destroying myself, but you also told me that living well would be the best revenge."

"I'm glad you remember."

"I heard you, but I couldn't picture it, couldn't understand."

Her gaze softened in a way that few were ever privileged to see. "And now you do?"

He nodded. "Yes. But I'm afraid I was . . . harsh with her. I said things I should not have." The weight inside him settled on his chest. "I'm afraid I've ruined things before they've really begun."

She gave him a little smile and sat forward—and paused at the sound of a loud rapping upon the front door.

"Oh, dear," she sighed. "I'm afraid that's for you."

"For me?"

She stood. "Come over to the window and see."

He did, looking out onto Craven Street. He cursed to see the afternoon sun gilding the edges of his father's coach.

"He's been waiting for over an hour." She placed a hand on his arm. "You don't have to go out there."

She was right. He didn't owe the vile old man a damned thing. Common sense told him not to engage, but instead he heeded his burning anger, the old hurts and betrayal, and he threw open the door, sidestepped around the footman in his family's livery, and crossed over to the spot where his father leaned out of his carriage window.

"I knew you'd come running right to your whore."

"Worried enough to track me down, Father?"

"Your fun is past, boy. You've had your taste of blood, pricking me with the fates of all my past concubines, but it's over now."

It would never be over, especially now that he'd gotten a whiff of victory. No, he would never give up—but he would never let his father see how much it cost him, either.

So he pasted on his most infuriating, devil-may-care smile. “To no one’s surprise, I find I disagree with you. I’ve not had nearly enough fun.”

“You won’t get any more out of this gambit. The Mitford widow is vain and shallow. Do you think she’ll help you, at her own expense?” He laughed. “She’s had a hint of what she’s up against and knows better than to fight it, even if you haven’t caught on, yet.” He cast a withering glance at Half Moon House. “You should learn to make better choices when it comes to your friends. I have, and I want you to watch while I start to reap the benefits.”

Vickers smoldered, but suddenly Addy’s voice rang in his head. *It’s harder to scare someone. Then you have to know what they don’t want to hear—or make a good guess.*

Instantly, it all became clear.

He shook his head, thinking quickly, all the while keeping that insouciant grin in place. “Oh, don’t worry. I’ll be watching. I wouldn’t look away now for the world. I’m about to have more fun than I’ve done in all my life.”

His father sneered. “You’re a fool and you’ll know it soon enough.”

He laughed. “No, Father. That lesson will be yours to learn. Both Marstoke and I are eager to see the moment when it all comes clear.”

“What?” His father paled. “What do you know of—”

“Marstoke?” He threw back his head and looked at the sky. “I take it back. Perhaps I am a fool,” he mused, rubbing his chin. “Yes, I’m a damned idiot for suffering some remnant of those old lessons in family duty—because I’m seriously considering telling you.”

“You’re bluffing,” the viscount sneered.

“Fine, then. Goodbye, sir.” He turned on his heel.

“Wait—Damn you, James! Marstoke is no joking matter. Tell me what you know, right now!”

He stared, considering. “I’ll give you the warning you don’t deserve, if you promise to hand Mother over to my protection.” He examined his fingernails. “If you’re smart you’ll be halfway to the

Americas by tomorrow, in any case, and she'll only slow you down."

"These scare tactics aren't going to work. I know when you're blowing smoke."

Vickers laughed. "That's a pony you've just won me, Father. I told Marstoke you'd say that."

"Told him when? You don't travel in his circles."

"Neither did you, until . . ." He shook his head. "No, never mind."

"Tell me, damn you!"

"Are we agreed about Mother?"

"Fine! You can have the addled cow."

He shook his head. "Evil to the end. Very well. I told Marstoke so, when I handed you over to him on a silver platter." He rolled his eyes. "Did you really think he needed help in setting a pigeon amongst the Queen's women? Or help plucking up one lone little Russian girl? What he needed was a scapegoat—and I gave him you. Someone dull-witted but tainted enough to believably pin the deed on." He snickered. "The Home Office might be slow in putting the pieces we left together, but they'll be along soon enough."

His father had gone fish-eyed. "You lie!"

He laughed. "You may believe it if you like. Just don't expect me to visit you while you await trial." He pulled out his watch and consulted it. "Enjoy your last day or so of freedom." He dropped the grin at last. "If you run, steer clear of France, I believe they've had word that Marstoke might have run there, and he won't take kindly to you escaping his net. Goodbye, Father."

"This isn't over," the old man yelled as he walked away. "I can destroy you from abroad as easily as from across Town." He shouted to his driver to head for home, quickly.

Vickers turned to watch him go, stunned that it might have actually worked. "On the contrary, I think that it finally is over."

Dumbfounded, he stood there for several moments. Then he turned and sprinted back inside.

Hestia was waiting at the window. "Did you just make that up, on the spot?"

He nodded.

Shaking her head, she laughed. “Well, done.”

“Where is she?” he asked.

Hestia smiled. “She’s waiting for you in Hyde Park.”

Chapter Eleven

Once committed, Addy toiled all day to see the thing done right. She chose her location carefully, putting her team of carpenters to work at Hyde Park Corner, where she could be guaranteed not only a crowd of aristocrats, but also a large party of spectators spilling in from the junction of busy streets.

The musicians arrived mid-afternoon. She gave them their direction then headed home to make her own preparations.

By the fashionable hour she was back, arrayed in her most exquisite blue ball gown, standing atop her newly constructed, raised dance floor, listening to the lovely strains of music competing with the noise of the traffic—and waiting.

Onlookers gathered. Word spread. The crowd grew.

Still, she waited.

They called questions, advice, bawdy offers and taunts.

She adjusted her newly, scandalously lowered bodice and waited.

At last a disturbance broke out on the edges of the crowd.

“Look, there!”

“On the Knightsbridge side,” someone shouted.

It was he. He came pelting in from the intersection, staring wildly at the assembled throng. People shouted, slapped him on the back, then parted, forming a path—and he caught sight of her.

He rushed through the open space and thrilled them all with a magnificent leap atop her dais.

“Hell and damnation, Addy. What are you doing?”

She swept into a curtsy, graceful and magnificently low. “I’m asking you to dance.”

He reached for her, looking chagrinned. “No, no. You don’t have to—”

She stayed where she was. “But I do.”

“Stand up!”

“Not until you agree to dance with me, Mr. Vickers.”

Shouts of encouragement nearly drowned out the music.

“Come on, Vickers, give the lady a dance!”

“No, keep her bent over, just like that!”

“Oh, very well, I’ll dance with you. Just please get up!”

She did, keeping hold of both of his hands as he helped her to her feet. “I’m not The Celestial any longer, James. I’ve taken a wrong step, in spectacular and memorable fashion. I’m not perfect—and now everyone knows it.”

Exquisite awareness beat through her every vein as he lifted a finger and smoothed her brow. “Oh, but you are. All your imperfections fit seamlessly with mine. *Together* we are perfect.”

“My name will be on every gossip’s lips tonight. My image in every scandal sheet tomorrow.” She grinned. “Now I’m exactly the sort of girl your father would not wish you to consort with—which I very much hope means that you will.”

His laugh touched her in secret places. “Scandalous or not, you are the only girl I mean to consort with.” He took her in his arms.

“The only one I mean to marry.”

He bent over her and this kiss, so soft and warm, tasted of purpose and joy instead of indecision and doubt.

“Will you?” he asked.

“Yes,” she whispered, and the crowd sighed.

He lifted his head. “Let’s do it quickly. I’ll get a special license tomorrow.”

“We’d best, or Great-Aunt Delia will have your head on a platter.”

The musicians struck up a waltz.

“Dance with me,” she whispered.

The mob fell silent as he took her hand in his and set his other at her waist. The music drifted on the breeze and the sun shone down a benediction as he led her out.

Never had there been a dance like this. Alone on the platform, they moved together as if they’d practiced every day of their lives. He held her scandalously close and she pressed closer still, reveling in his scent and warmth and the incredibly safe, stimulating feel of him

surrounding her. Their feet might have been on air, so lightly they moved, so perfectly in time with each other and the swell of the music. The traffic, the park, the crowd all faded and she was just a woman, sublimely suited to a man.

Applause broke out as the song faded.

“I promise, James, now that I am wicked too, that I’ll do anything to help you in your cause. I’ll don a disguise or flirt with your father’s disreputable friends or bribe my way in to see your mother. Anything that will help or ease your mind.”

He gripped her shoulders. “Thank you for the offer, my sweet, but we may not have to worry any longer. In fact . . .” He gazed speculatively out over the crowd, then pulled her to the edge of the dais.

They all fell silent, waiting.

“It would seem that my father, the viscount, has been implicated in crimes against the government. If, by chance, he owes any of you money, I’d see about collecting now. I predict he’ll be running for the nearest port any minute now.”

She covered her mouth, questioning him with a look as several men detached themselves from the group to head for the street.

“What’s happened?”

“It turns out that I can tell a story, too.” He explained.

“James! That was brilliant!”

He shrugged. “You inspired me. I admit I’m disheartened, though, that you won’t need to resort to disgraceful behavior. If I ask nicely, will you flirt, bribe and wear a disguise, just for me?”

“Any time you ask,” she promised. “I’m aiming to gain a new nickname, now that the old must be tossed aside.” She nodded toward the crowd. “I mean to give them plenty of stories to tell about me and they’ll need to call me something.” She tilted her head. “Do you have any ideas?”

“I quite like the sound of Mrs. Vickers.”

“Hmm . . .” She bit her lip. “I think I prefer . . . the Wicked Mrs. Vickers.”

He held her tight. “So do I.”

Epilogue

Addy leaned across and kissed her husband as the carriage made its way to the manor house in Crawley. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Of the two of us, I always knew you were the angel.” She gave him another quick, smacking kiss. “Not many men would agree to start their bridal trip with a visit to an infant.”

She smiled when he kissed her back. “I confess, I’m looking forward to meeting her, although I don’t know much about infant girls.”

“You won’t have to,” she reassured him. “Mary writes that she’s in a bossy stage. She’ll likely tell you what to do.”

Everyone was out to meet them again. Addy made the introductions, then looked around. “But where is Muriel? Is she at her nap?”

“No, she’s coming along.” Her aunt suppressed a smile. “She’s got a surprise for you.”

“Another pinecone?”

“No,” someone said behind her. “Better than that.”

She gasped and spun about, then clutched at James as her knees threatened to give out. “Papa?”

He stooped to pick Muriel up, then rushed her, holding them both while Addy sobbed and Muriel patted her head.

“I’m sorry,” he said into her hair. “I was wrong. I’m so sorry.”

“I was already having doubts,” he told Addy later, at tea, while Muriel directed James in how to rearrange all the curios in a cabinet. “Then I started dreaming of your mother, shaking her finger at me. When we were delayed in Spain, I thought it must be a sign.” He looked sheepish. “Then Hestia’s letter arrived.”

Addy’s eyes widened. “Oh, my.”

“Yes, you can imagine. She didn’t hold her punches. And she was right. Your mother would never have forgiven me, had I left you for so long.” He glanced at her. “It was long enough, I see. I didn’t like what I heard about The Celestial. It didn’t sound like my spitfire,

story-telling girl.” He cleared his throat. “But I see she is back.”

“She is,” Addy replied contentedly.

“And she’s happy?”

“Very happy, indeed.”

She repeated the sentiment to James later, as the coach pulled away, headed for Brighton.

“I am glad,” he said.

She leaned into his hand as he tucked away a stray strand of hair.

“I was very interested in seeing how well you looked holding a babe in your arms,” he whispered.

She blushed. “There are so very many things to see before then, though. I was thinking of seeing how you look sprawled nude against a Parisian backdrop.”

He raised a brow. “Nude?”

“It’s artistic, is it not? Don’t many young women go to Paris to hone their artistic skills?”

“You, my sweet, are a story teller, and that’s a different sort of artist.”

“I’ll learn to paint, if it means having you nude against a Parisian backdrop.” She squealed as he hopped across to her side of the carriage and gathered her in his arms. “Or perhaps I’ll write a naughty story about it.”

“Will you? Who will you tell it to?”

“Only you,” she said.

“That sounds . . . perfect.”

About the Author

USA Today Bestseller Deb Marlowe adores History, England and Men in Boots. Clearly she was destined to write Regency Historical Romance!

A Golden Heart Award winner and Rita nominee, Deb grew up in Pennsylvania with her nose in a book. Luckily, she'd read enough romances to recognize the true modern hero she met at a college Halloween party--even though he wore a tuxedo t-shirt instead of breeches and boots. They married, settled in North Carolina and produced two handsome, intelligent and genuinely amusing boys. Though she spends much of her time with her nose in her laptop, for the sake of her family she does occasionally abandon her inner world for the domestic adventure of laundry, dinner and carpool. Despite her sacrifice, not one of the men in her family is yet willing to don breeches or tall boots. She's working on it.

Want to learn when a new release is coming out? Sign up for my Newsletter at <http://www.DebMarlowe.com> - <http://debmarlowe.com>. You can also find me on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)!

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This book is part of the Half Moon House Series. The other books available in the series are :

The Love List

An Unexpected Encounter

A Slight Miscalculation

Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

and coming soon:

The Leading Lady

